




The Wallflower and the Rake

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The Wallflower and the Rake

by [Stein048](#)

Summary

Harry Potter Historical Romance AU:

"How does what you want benefit me? You want me to give myself to you, in a way that I never wished to give to a man. You ask for so much."

"Oh, this won't be just for me," his lips curled into a smirk. "But I can give you everything you need. What you desire. You are free to do as you wish--as long as you come for me."

Gentle Readers;

Independence comes at a steep price. What happens when the Duke of Wiltshire, notorious rake Draco Malfoy, makes an offer the would-be spinster, Miss Hermione Granger, cannot afford to refuse?

Your Ever Observant-

Lady Quibbler

Alpha/Beta Readers-

LaDeeDaa35/slytherinphoenix713/CarrieMaxwell/Pia_Bartolini/Halliwell19

This is a regency fic, inspired by the Bridgerton series but is original. I have not read nor intend to read the books at this time. Credit to the use of Lady Quibbler, which is inspired by Lady Whistledown.

The Wallflower

Chapter Notes

Artwork done by the talented **ellemisc**



Gentle Readers of London;

*With a new Season upon us,
it seems that it will be filled with fresh
new debutantes and eager bachelors.*

*We wonder who will catch the interest of the most desirables?
What scandals await? Ballrooms and banquet halls will soon be swathed in a sea of colors
and fabrics.*

*Rumors will abound, lips will gossip and surely we will have at least one hurried wedding
before the season is out.*

*Follow me, gentle readers, to find out whom plucks the first flower and slips a ring upon
their finger.*

Yours Truly,

Lady Quibbler

~*~

The ballroom of Malfoy Manor was lavishly decorated. Towering vases filled with flowers, freshly cut from the splendid gardens. The air was filled with dulcet tones of the band playing softly as guests arrived for the ball.

None of which Hermione paid attention to. She was no longer a debutante, but rather a wallflower of a few years. She had found no interest in marrying a wealthy member of society. In fact, she had found no interest in *any of it*.

From a young age, her interest had been hiding away in her fathers library and filling her head with silly dreams and knowledge. As she had managed to slip through for years, unwed, she no longer received as many dance requests or attention at all. Those she had received were from her close friends or more lowly born Lords. Which was ideal, as it kept her circle small and she remained unnoticed.

She was free to wander away to the quietest parts of the mansion, usually that being the library.

Hermione had become familiar with this library in particular, being one of her favorites to lose herself in as soon as she was no longer obligated to make an appearance. She slipped out her wand out of the charmed pocket of her skirts, whispering *lumos*. The light slid along the books as she made her way down the aisle, trying to remember where had left off. She paused as she spotted the familiar title, lightly plucking the book from the shelf and into her arms.

She made her way towards the settee tucked in the corner, pulling her legs beneath her bottom as she settled into the cushions of the chair. She tucked her wand into her carefully managed curls atop her head, uncaring that she would look silly with the thing lighting the pages.

The faint sounds of the soirée could still be heard through the partially closed library door; sounds of laughter and the chatter of polite conversation.

None of it drew Hermione out of the pages of her borrowed book, losing herself in the story before her instead of the world beyond the library she had little interest in. She could continue this pattern for some years, she knew.

Eventually she would become forgotten altogether, her parents would lose their silly expectations of her future and a wedding. She could become the spinster she yearned to be.

Free of any man and his demands, able to live her life the way she wanted.

It sounded perfect to Hermione.

Draco Malfoy bowed over the petite blonde witch's hand as the dance came to a close, Daphne Greengrass dipping into a perfect curtsy before him. Her blue skirts rustled against his boots as she straightened, fawning a smile at him. She was a pretty thing, on the younger side and well endowed. Not just in looks, either. Both Daphne and her sister Astoria had massive dowries to lure in potential suitors.

The witches had their eyes set high, aiming for wizards with titles and lands.

And those were far and few between.

There were several notable rakes in attendance this evening, each garnishing their own significant amount of attention; Ronald Weasley was Baron of Barrow Ends, his elder brothers having married and gained higher titles. Theodore Nott was the Viscount of Nott Estate after the death of his father. Blaise, son of a seven times widower, was Earl of Northwoods Castle. Harry had been born into his title with the sudden death of both of his parents, becoming Marquis of Grimmauld. And finally, Draco Malfoy was Duke of Wiltshire, resident rake of Malfoy Manor.

All of them were the most eligible bachelors of the ton and all had escaped marriage thus far. Barely in their twenties, it was expected of them to start to seek a suitable wife to marry but Draco found such things to be a bore. Why on earth would he want to tie himself to a single witch when he could live his life as a free man?

As a Duke, he had wealth at his disposal to live how he wished.

Draco could go where he pleased, at his leisure, doing whatever he wished without the obnoxious responsibilities that came with marriage.

Daphne's hand lingered a moment too long on his, her lashes fluttering as she looked at him. She was a perfect candidate for someone in his position.

Such a shame he had no interest in forming any attachments.

"I do believe your next partner awaits, Lady Greengrass," Draco released her hand, gesturing with a nod towards Weasley as he hovered nearby.

Despite Draco's lack of interest in marriage, there were plenty of other wizards eager to find their match and they practically fell over themselves in an attempt to win the attention of the Greengrass sisters. He strode away from the floor towards the side table, looking to extricate himself from the woman's grasp before she attempted further conversation.

He withdrew the dance card from the pocket of his tailcoat, turning it over between his fingers to look at his expected schedule for the evening. Of course it had filled almost immediately with debutantes, eager at the chance to dance with a Duke. He had been careful to leave a block free, giving him just enough time to step away from the ballroom.

Draco slipped the card back into his pocket as he swiped a flute of champagne from a passing waiter, taking a sip of the as he made his way to the hallway. His black dragonhide shoes clicked on the floor with each step as he moved away from the noise of the crush. He nudged the door to the library open with his elbow, glancing over his shoulder once more to see if he had been followed.

Assured he was alone, Draco slipped unnoticed into the cavernous space. He paused at the faint glow that lit the corner of the library, shifting his body sideways to glance down the aisle with a raised brow.

A woman sat there, tucked away into the settee with her wand shoved into her brunette curls. She was the source of the light in the room, the glow from the tip of her wand illuminating her and the book in her hands. He couldn't see her face at this angle, only the spine of her book.

Hermione turned the page as she shifted in her seat, turning her body sideways to kick her legs out from under her as they started to grow numb. She leaned back against the arm of the settee, her legs hanging over the opposite armrest as she slipped lower into the chair.

Someone cleared their throat and she immediately sat upright, her finger tucked into the pages of the book to mark her page as she whipped her head around to the sound. A man she only vaguely recognized as someone well above her station stood there, his brows raised at her as she pushed her skirts down to cover her ankles. She hastily reached up, jerking her wand free of her curls and extinguishing the light.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” Came his slow drawl as he lifted the glass to his lips, brilliant silver eyes laughing at her over the rim. “This is usually my haunt to escape the festivities.”

Hermione let her eyes make a quick assessment of the intruder; a wizard of her age, someone of high station. Likely someone she had intentionally avoided due to his standing but yet he gave her a nagging sense that she had seen him before. She paid little mind to paintings amongst the halls of these Manors, yet she had the feeling he would be one she might see. He was quite tall, naturally so. His black leather dragonhide shoes were flat rather than heeled, such as some men wore. His trousers were black, tailored to hug well defined calves and thighs.

Not that she should notice such things.

Her eyes slipped higher; black waistcoat with a green handkerchief folded into the breast pocket. His vest was silver, mimicking the shade of his eyes. Her gaze finally met his, white blonde hair falling forward to shade those eyes she had just been comparing to his clothing moments before. His lips quirked in a smirk as a perfect brow arched.

By then Hermione realized she had been silent during the entire time she had taken in his appearance. She rose to her feet as she felt the heat creeping along her cheeks, “My apologies, My Lord. I must have consumed too much of the wine and just lost myself for a moment.”

Silver rings caught the light as he lifted his glass to his lips momentarily, covering his amused smirk, “Lost yourself...in a book?”

She bit the inside of her cheek as she drummed her fingers along the cover of the book, “Precisely.”

The man remained standing before her, his head tipping ever so slightly to the side as he considered her. She was patiently waiting for him to grow bored and leave so she could return to her sanctuary. The moment only lasted seconds, but that was entirely too long for Hermione. She moved towards the bookshelf, slipping the book back into its home before she turned back to the wizard.

“It seems my uninterrupted time has come to an end,” Hermione pointed out coolly as she started to walk towards the door. Which meant towards the man she was trying to evade, “If you’ll excuse me, I find myself wanting to return to the festivities to indulge in some more wine.”

He tapped his ring against the glass as he silently watched her, silver eyes keen as they swept across her face, “You have no interest in the soiree, do you?”

Hermione paused at his blunt words, unsure how to answer such a direct question. She looked up at him, “No. Tell me, how many witches do you find stowed away in the library at such events?”

“None,” Came his response, his tone low and quiet. He held her gaze as he turned slightly, motioning towards the door. “I apologize for my intrusion. But by all means, don’t let me keep you from filling your dance card.” His free hand came out to flick the dance card hanging from her wrist, arching that brow again.

She scoffed as she withdrew a step, “I keep mine clear so I can slip away, My Lord.”

“I wish I could say the same,” He didn’t have to follow her, his arm was long enough to cross the distance to lift her card, “It’s a struggle to keep a block to myself.”

“I’m sure you *thoroughly* enjoy the attention of all the desperate debutantes,” Hermione replied, watching as he unclasped the band from her wrist and turned the blank card over in his hand. His silver eyes lifted to hers as he withdrew his wand, tapping it against the card. A name scrawled across the first line, as if written by his own hand. She frowned down at the card, watching as he easily reattached it to her arm.

“I don’t,” came his all too cheerful response, “They are quite droll. But alas, now you can spare me one dance from them and silently suffer with me.”

Hermione was silently fuming as she reentered the ballroom, the dance card on her wrist feeling like a dead weight. They were charmed so the names only crossed out after the completion of a dance and would continue to reappear at each following event until the dance was fulfilled. She glowered down at the slip as she lifted it between her fingers, the letters dancing under her gaze.

Her frown increased as she took in his name; Lord D. Malfoy.

It couldn’t be *the* Duke, could it?

Perhaps he had a brother. She looked over the rim of the card, her eyes immediately finding the tall lord through the crush of nobles. He was unmistakable, dominating the room with his presence. Debutants and eager mothers swarmed around him, trying to gain his attention. He had a pleasant smile, perhaps a bored expression settling on his face as he let his eyes travel over the witches' heads to scan the crowd.

Eventually his eyes found hers and he raised his glass in acknowledgement before lifting it to his lips, hiding a faint smirk as he turned away from her.

The letters of his name flashed on the card, indicating their dance was approaching.

Hermione hadn’t been forced to dance in weeks and she wasn’t going to do so now. She detested it, having been compelled from a young age to learn the steps. She could do them in her sleep and she had no interest in doing them during the day. She was a *wallflower* and she loathed the idea of being in the center of a crowd. She had fulfilled her obligation to her

parents of making an appearance at this soiree and she now could leave without raising questions.

She stayed close to the wall as she made her way towards the foyer, slipping by everyone unnoticed.

Which is what she liked.

To be unseen.

Draco watched the witch as she minced her way around the outskirts of the ballroom, barely noticed by anyone as she slipped past them. A carefully curated behavior, he was sure. When he had found her in the library, she was barely noticeable there. The only indication he had not been alone was from the glow of her wand.

Without that, he would have overlooked her.

The woman was not necessarily plain in appearance, but her beauty was subtle. Subdued. Her gown didn't help, either. It was a muted plum color, which complimented her olive skin tone but helped her melt into the shadows. Most of the witches at these events wore extravagant gowns of brilliant shades to draw the eye, makeup painted onto their faces. Most of the witches here were in search of eligible wizards to wed, hoping to marry into wealth and titles.

Most witches.

Not the witch who had refused to give her name before leaving him in the library to ponder her lack of interest.

Most witches fawned over him, fluttered their lashes and cooed inappropriate things beneath their breath.

Apparently, this wallflower was not like most.

Draco pretended to nod his head in agreement to something that the witch in front of him said, slipping his dance card from his pocket to look at the list of names magically inscribed there. Most were crossed out by now, but the newest addition was flashing gold. It was indication he was supposed to go claim the dance.

She may not have given her name willingly, but the moment Draco had signed her dance card her name had appeared on his. It would remain there until he completed his obligation. His silver eyes scanned the letters quickly, frowning over her name. He had never heard of Miss

H. Granger before. Perhaps she was a new arrival in the town, or a witch from lower standing. His circle tended to put him with the same group, such as the Greengrass's, Parkinson, Nott. Granger was not a surname he recognized.

"Please excuse me," Draco murmured to the witch at his side, his keen eyes catching the subtle movement towards the door where his next dance partner was heading to. He didn't wait for a response as he dipped away from his current company.

He was able to cross the room with minimal interruption, pausing only briefly to greet others. Miss Granger slipped through the doorway into the foyer just ahead of him, speaking to the valet to summon her carriage. She turned at the sound of his shoes clicking on the tile, her polite mask of indifference settling into place.

"Miss Granger," Draco called to her as he neared.

If she was disappointed that he knew her name, she hid it well.

"My Lord," She greeted him, looking away as she waited for the valet to return, "I fear I must be leaving. I won't be able to join you for our dance this evening." It could have been her imagination, but she swore she heard him scoff at her remark.

The heavy wooden double doors were swung inward magically as her carriage rolled to a stop at the base of the stairs. Granger spared him a subtle glance from beneath her lashes as she pulled her satin gloves on as her valet stepped down from the carriage to open the door for her.

"Feeling a bit *lost* again?" Draco replied as he followed her to the landing, his eyes traveling to the front of the carriage where a horse would normally stand. Nothing seemed to be drawing the carriage, the harness hovering in mid air as if charmed there. He wondered...His attention was drawn away from them as she spoke.

"I seem to be finding my way home just fine, thank you." Granger started down the stairs, pausing for a moment as she noticed his gaze, "Thestrals, My Lord. I'm sure you'll find a book in your library about them. Fascinating beasts. Only those who have seen death may see them."

"Of course I've *heard* of Thestrals," He muttered to himself as he tipped his head, his attention returning to her as she crossed the gravel. He had never seen them; her carriage being case and point to that. Most members of polite society did not use them as the depictions in texts tended to be quite frightful in appearance.

Granger turned as she reached her carriage, her brow arching as she gripped the door, "That's what I said, yes. Have an exhausting—I mean wonderful— evening, My Lord." She ducked into the carriage without waiting for a response, the valet closing the door sharply behind her. With a snap of reins against the invisible creatures back, the carriage leapt into motion. Draco was left standing on the landing, watching her leave as his dance card vibrated obnoxiously on his wrist to indicate he had missed his dance.

Hermione stripped off her gloves as she made her way to the stairs, taking two at the time to the second floor of her parents' townhouse. Despite her parents not being titled, the Granger family was indeed quite affluent for their standing. She had a handsome dowry, but the lack of a titled family helped create anonymity for her. She wasn't from a line of nobility like the Greengrass sisters, or a well known one like the Weasley's.

Had she been born into any other affluent family she would have been thrust into the limelight and forced into a marriage by now.

The thought made her skin crawl.

So many witches, married young, expecting to follow their husbands wishes and bear children like broodmares.

Ugh.

No, that wasn't the life Hermione dreamt of.

She wished to be free, to finish her higher magical education. She was self taught in many areas, expanding her abilities by what she found between the pages of books. But it wasn't the same as a formal education, taught by wizards who had a vast wealth of knowledge and years of experience.

Her dear friend Ginevra— Ginny, for short— was the youngest of the noble Weasley family and had debuted this year, alongside the youngest Greengrass sister, Astoria. Hermione had high hopes that with these witches being the season's desirable debutantes, she would be able to completely extricate herself from such silly affairs as balls and soirées. That she could slip away entirely into obscurity.

She only needed to last this one final season, and next year she would be crossing from her tender teens into her twenties. And officially she would become *undesirable*.

Hermione scoffed as she entered her room; such a silly thing, to think a witch in her twenties was no longer considered of marrying age.

They were *old*, spinsters.

No, the eligible bachelors and rakes only wanted the innocent and fresh young debutantes.

Such silly drivel, the lot of it.

She could hardly wait to be done with all the pomp and circumstances.

Come next spring, Hermione would be leaving London to travel abroad and be free of the archaic expectations thrust upon her merely because of her gender.

She tugged the silk choker from her neck, casting it aside as she started to untie the laces down the front of her gown. She just had to survive the season, unnoticed, which she was sure she could do just as she had before.

By hiding in the libraries.

Because no one sought her there.

Hermione stepped out of her gown as it slipped away, her fingers fumbling with the laces at the back of her corset. *Just one more bloody year* of having to dress like the proper lady. Once abroad she would have more freedom to wear things of comfort.

Perhaps, dare she hope, *trousers*?

She threw herself down onto her bed with a sigh, the silence only interrupted as the dance card still tied about her wrist hummed with vibration against the sheets. She lifted her arm above her, the card dangling in front of her face.

The only name on the card was flashing, taunting her.

Lord D. Malfoy.

A wrench in her carefully laid plans.

What did the wizard hope to gain by accosting a dance from her? He was the first to stumble upon her in the library in two entire seasons. She had already made it through most of the night without a single offer— only granting one to her friend Harry, the Marquis of Grimmauld and Ginny's brother, Ronald. They always offered, perhaps because they thought it polite. Which it was, Hermione enjoyed *their* company immensely. But as friends of the family, people no longer seemed to expect a proposal from either of those bachelors.

Everyone knew they merely did it out of kindness.

But Lord Malfoy?

What was his angle in all of this? He had jested he didn't want to *suffer* alone. Did he despise these events as much as her?

It all seemed unlikely; even she had heard of him and his reputation as a rake. A scoundrel amongst the ton. He had flaunted his mistress last year at the soirees and balls, causing a subdued uproar— because polite society never could be overly scandalized when a Duke engaged in nefarious activities. They had to dip their heads and accept it, no matter how inappropriate it was.

Because the Duke was above their stations.

More barbarity.

Hermione dropped her arm to the bed, the vibration continuing obnoxiously. It wouldn't quit until she fulfilled the dance with the wizard. She tugged it off her wrist, casting it aside with a groan.

It was almost as bad as a howler: she had never ignored one before as her dance card usually remained bare, but she heard tales of how the darned things escalate with each missed

opportunity to fulfill the now obligatory dance.

“*Merde*,” Hermione muttered loudly as she kicked off her slippers before diving beneath the coverlet, dragging the silk sheet over her head.

She loathed the idea that tomorrow would be another bloody soirée, except this time including a grand feast at which she had to partake in before being able to slip away.

With the evening drawing to a close, Draco found himself able to slip away to his office. The room was impressive in stature; all rich dark hues from mahogany woods to blackened shades of greens and reds. The furniture were family heirlooms from decades past, hand carved and heavy pieces. Drapes and linens made of black leather and silk. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with tomes and ledgers. A small collection compared to the Manors library.

He had done as expected of him and made the rounds, greeting the notable members of the ton. He had danced with the debutantes and eligible witches.

By the sound of the card buzzing in his pocket, all except one.

How annoying.

Draco moved to the sideboard, digging out a bottle of Firewhiskey and pouring himself a glass. The liquid stung the back of his throat as he tipped it back, downing the whole shot at once.

He had no idea what possessed him to fill his last dance slot with *her* name— because he rather loathed dancing— but he had an impulse. Perhaps because he had stumbled upon her doing exactly what he had been seeking to do. Or perhaps because she exhibited a glib tongue and sharp mind.

He drummed his fingers against his empty glass, debating on if he should indulge in another.

Most witches and wizards hastened to make his acquaintance, eager to please him. To *befriend* him. To ensnare him into marriage.

But this witch, *Hermione Granger*— he had only retrieved her name because it had appeared on his card, she had not offered it— didn’t seem at all affected by his title. Even after she had undoubtedly learned of it from her dance card, she had dismissed him with all the cool grace his mother employed.

It had caught Draco off guard.

He had yet to meet a witch who didn't fawn over him.

Not to mention he had never heard of her or seen her before. Draco wondered if this Miss Granger was someone with a reputation. A past indiscretion, perhaps? They tended to be shunned from polite society to the point of falling into obscurity.

Pouring himself that second glass, he moved to sit in the heavy winged chair before the quiet fireplace. Draco motioned with his hand to stroke the coals to life with wandless magic, a mere moment later a fire growing and spreading its warmth throughout the room. He nursed his drink as he rested his chin on his palm, setting his glass against his thigh as he crossed his ankle over his knee.

The card buzzed again in his pocket and he dug it out, holding it up between two fingers. The low light of the fire caught the writing, illuminating the only name that remained unscratched off. He flicked it away, the card fluttering to his desk to join the pile of unanswered calling cards for events throughout the week. Draco rarely responded to them, merely showing up on a whim— usually with his mother's insistence that he make an appearance. The dance card could be heard rustling against the letters, the sound similar to a colony of honeybees.

Draco sighed as he polished off his drink, rising to his feet to answer its obnoxious call. He flicked it to the side and rifled through the invitations, finding one set for tomorrow's date at the Weasley Estate home. He should attend in hopes that he could cross off the witch's name from his card.

He *should* attend to pacify his mother and father in his search for a wife, but he hardly intended to look for one.

Perhaps a mistress, but not a *wife*.

"Bloody hell, why not?" Draco set his glass down on the desk and swept out of the room, eager to fall asleep in his bed and rest up before attending another achingly boring function.

The dining hall at Barrows End was magically expanded to fit the dozens of guests in attendance, candles bobbing through the air to cast a warm glow about the space. It created a romantic atmosphere; the perfect setting to draw people together in intimate accord. With Ginny debuting this season, the Weasleys were eager to wed off their youngest and only daughter.

Hermione found herself near the middle of the expensive and elaborate banquet table, seated across from Ginny. There was no seating arrangement at the Weasleys' luncheons or soirées, but there was the unsaid expectation that one must sit besides either their spouse or one who is available to be wed.

How delightful.

She was grateful when Ginny's brother, Ronald, slipped into the chair beside her with a pained groan. They were childhood friends, being of the same age and having grown up together. Hermione smiled at him warmly, one of the few wizards she was always glad to see. The Baron was a handsome man, having just returned from his military service to the Crown. His skin was now deeply tanned, muting the freckles that marched across his face. His usually brilliant red hair had also become darker from the constant sun exposure.

He was one of the few who knew of Hermione's true intentions to skate her way through the seasons, unnoticed. Ron gave her adequate cover when she was recruited to dance, taking her on the floor himself so she would be spared the company of any wizards trying to make her acquaintance.

Which was far and few between.

"Why must your Mama host these silly affairs which require me to attend?" Hermione grumbled under her breath as she leaned towards Ron.

He slanted her a smile, patting her hand on the table, "Oh, hush. You know you have a grand time no matter how much you hem and haw over it."

"Hmph," Hermione rolled her eyes as she straightened in her seat, "Only because I'm in such fine—" the chair beside her scraped out and she turned as the Duke of Wiltshire, Draco Malfoy, sat down with a flourish next to her, "—Company. Excuse me for a moment, Ron." She pivoted in seat, "Your Grace, I'm afraid that seat is reserved."

The Duke looked at the table, making a show of searching for the name cards that were clearly absent at this event, "I don't believe it is."

"I assure you, *it is* She insisted as she narrowed her eyes on him. She gestured politely with a hand towards the farthest of the end table, "Perhaps you would be more comfortable down over there. All the way, just there besides Miss Greengrass."

He didn't even make an effort to look at the petite witch she gestured at as he plucked the linen from the table, shaking it out briskly and then settling it across his thigh. The wizard looked impeccable in his evening attire, his black jacket crisp, complemented with a black shirt and a silk forest green cravat that was neatly folded at the base of his throat.

"Hm, no. I'm quite comfortable here. But thank you for your concern," The Duke motioned for the wine, the bottle drifting lazily towards him from down the table. He tapped his empty glass and the bottle tipped forward, filling it to the brim with a bubbling red wine.

Hermione ran her tongue along her teeth as she cleared her throat, "My *Lord*—" She grunted as she felt an elbow dug into her ribs and foot simultaneously kicking her from beneath the table. Ginny flashed her a warning look from behind her fan as she lifted it high enough to shield her from the Duke.

"*Hermione*," Ron's voice was in her ear, "He is a Duke. You *must* mind your tongue."

She bristled at his words, “Ronald. I simply cannot—”

“Yes, Miss Granger. You should probably listen to the Baron,” The Duke’s drawling voice chimed in from beside her, a brow arched high as she turned to face him. A smirk adorned his sharply planed face, his steel gray eyes sparkling with amusement at her expense.

Of bloody course he had overheard their hurried whispers.

“You should have sat elsewhere and this would be a non-issue,” Hermione replied lightly as she flicked her napkin off the table, looking away from him pointedly.

“And miss this *delightful* conversation?” He chuckled as he leaned down to her ever so slightly, “You underestimate me, Granger.”

Hermione smoothed her napkin across her lap as she spared him a glance, “I don’t think I do and I would prefer you to go converse elsewhere.”

“Such a sharp tongue,” The Duke tutted quietly as he rapped his ring against the stem of his glass, “Don’t worry. I’ll let you converse with your Baron. I only intend to claim my dance from you once the feast has to come to an end.”

She scoffed loudly, drawing a curious glance from their neighbors. Ron was studiously ignoring them now as his tray of food slowly settled down before him. The plates drifted lazily through the air until they found their owners. Hermione’s finally arrived, settling onto the table before her with a gentle *plop*.

“I have no intention of fulfilling that dance, Your Grace,” She whispered out of the corner of her mouth as she lightly picked up her fork. She looked down at her plate with a sharp clearing of her throat, indicating she was no longer interested in carrying on the conversation.

The Duke did not receive the hint, or perhaps he simply decided to ignore it.

The latter seemed the most likely as he spoke, “You cannot refuse it.”

She stabbed her fork into the chicken forcefully as she bit out, “Watch me.”

Another jab to the ribs from Ron’s elbow. She made note to have a discussion with the irritating wizard later.

What was the Duke’s sudden fascination with her? *Bloody hell*. She just wanted to disappear into the floorboards.

“A challenge?” He slipped his hand into the pocket of his waistcoat, withdrawing the dance card from the previous day. He held it upright between two fingers in the air. Her name flashed brightly across the top. “I see it’s no longer vibrating. Perhaps because of our proximity to one another, it’s expecting us to fulfill our obligation.”

“An *obligation* I did not agree to nor did I wish to have,” Hermione lifted her wrist, her dance card hanging limp. The only name on her card was his.

She had to note that it had subsided its vibrations as well, or perhaps she had simply tuned it out for the entirety of the day. Her eyes slipped past the card to meet his as he looked at her, one corner of his lips tugging upward into that ridiculously arrogant smirk of his.

“It seems we have only two options, Miss Granger; either remain next to each other the rest of the evening *or* we can just have the one dance and be done,” The Duke said in a low voice.

“ *Merde.* ”

The Wager

Despite the hall being expanded to capacity, the seating at the table was still rather snug for Draco's liking. He found himself rubbing elbows with both of the ladies at his sides. The obstinate Miss Granger was blatantly ignoring each bump of their arms, even going as far as to turn her body ever so slightly away from his after tossing him a poorly-concealed glare.

After setting his dance card on the table between them, the annoying thing continuing to flash her name, Draco turned his attention to the witch on his other side. She was quite fetching, he had to admit.

"Miss Lovegood, correct?" Draco asked as she turned a pair of wide, cool gray eyes to him. Her smile was genuine, but her eyes remained almost unfocused. As if her mind was elsewhere. Pale blonde hair curled and piled atop her head, a few strands breaking free to settle against her shoulder.

Her voice was quiet and melodic as she responded, "It is. You are the Duke of Nottingham, correct?"

"Wiltshire," He corrected automatically.

Miss Lovegood's smile remained unaffected as she blinked once, "My mistake. I've been reading this very interesting Muggle book, you see?"

He didn't.

She continued, "And there is this lord of Nottingham— Hermione?" Lovegood leaned forward to speak around him. Miss Granger turned around at her name, her eyes briefly touching his face before acknowledging the witch who had called her, "You are a walking encyclopedia, dear. What is the title of the book that has some Nottingham fellow in it?"

"Luna," Granger smiled fondly at the blonde witch as she waved her fingers in front of him to indicate he needed to lean back, "I believe you are thinking of the *Sheriff* of Nottingham from a book called Robin Hood. He wasn't noble at all. Quite the scoundrel that most people disliked."

Her barb was well placed.

Draco narrowed his eyes on her briefly, trying hard not to rise to the bait as Lovegood spoke again, her voice lilting as she smiled pleasantly, "Oh, that's right. How silly of me to forget. How I wish I could have your mind, Hermione."

Today Granger wore a gown in muted colors, a soft pale rose. The cut was simple, demure. Innocent yet not virginal, so to speak. He found many of the debutantes to wear dresses to draw the eyes to certain features of their body, such as a slim waist or a hint of their breasts. Granger did neither. Her hair was simple, the curls twisted together atop her head with one curl bouncing free to tease her collarbone.

“You are too kind,” Miss Granger said pleasantly, “I simply value my studies above all else. Oh, look! It appears the meal is drawing to a close.” Before either could respond, the witch had shoved her chair back from the table with a gusto, the wood scraping loudly against the tile and drawing everyone’s eyes to her. She appeared unbothered by this fact.

“Goodbye,” Lovegood said to Granger wistfully as she turned back to her plate before her.

Draco watched the curly haired witch bound away from the table, his card vibrating insistently as she made her escape.

The dance hall was gloriously decorated, the usual clutter of furniture having been banished to make room for dancers. Candles bobbed through the air, recreating that hazy and warm atmosphere that had been in the dining room. Instruments hummed on their own in the corner, charmed to play without a musician. Barrows End was nowhere near as grand as some of the other Manors, such as Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire, but it had a charm to it that Hermione found soothing. An appeal of a cozy comfort rather than resplendent wealth and opulence.

In most cases, that is.

A brief flutter of annoyance crossed her mind that Malfoy Manor had been the first place to come to her thoughts. She rarely paid it much heed beyond the fact it had a glorious library, there should be no reason for her to think of it.

Hermione tucked herself away to one edge of the room, blatantly ignoring the card on her wrists as it audibly hummed now. She was watching her debutante friend swirling about the floor with the Marquis. They made a fetching pair, and indeed Ginny’s mother was angling for that match.

Movement caught the corner of her eye, black robes against the billowing colors of gowns on the floor.

She inwardly groaned.

“I believe you are lost, My Lord,” Hermione said as she plucked a glass of wine from the tray of a passing waiter, turning away from the Duke as he approached her, “Miss Parkinson is just there. And she’s looking right at you. You must be her next dance.”

She went as far as to smile at the raven haired witch, hoping the debutante would get the hint to approach them. She had never wanted to be saved before but she was eager to slip away from the notorious rake to her favorite haunt in the Weasley’s home.

Perhaps she could even steal Ginny away with her.

The Duke stopped before her, his back to the dancers as he arched a brow down at her. He flashed his dance card, her name flashing brightly across the top of a list of names. She wanted to throw the damned thing out the window. Her card hummed on her wrist.

Damn them both.

“I’m right where I need to be—” He was saying quietly as he slipped the card into his breast pocket.

“Annoying me?” Hermione scoffed as she looked away from him, lifting her glass to her lips.

“—*Trying* to fulfill my next dance obligation—”

“An issue you created,” She muttered as she looked at him from over the rim of her glass.

He continued over her interruption, “—and until then, I must remain at your side so I don’t have to listen to the bloody card going off in my pocket.”

“It’s quite annoying, isn’t it?”

Much like his persistence.

The Duke turned to stand beside her, his elbow brushing her. Her card fell completely still now and she resisted the urge to sulk as she took another sip from her glass. It irked her to no end that he was correct. Proximity silenced the cards, and a dance would cross out his name.

He looked down at her, “See? Just agree to the dance and I’ll leave you be. All the witches enjoy dancing with me,”

“That’s because they like you,” Hermione said evenly as she shifted slightly further from him, using her skirts to hide her footsteps as she inched away. “Which I do not.”

“Miss Granger, how can you presume to dislike someone you scarcely even know?” The Duke lifted a brow at her, his voice quiet.

It was a low timber that sent an odd shiver through her body. His tone was clipped, demanding a response.

She paused her escape to lift her chin as she looked at him. It was a struggle to keep the bitterness out of her voice, “Because I know of *you*. A rake, a man of reputation. Titled. Wealthy. Free to do as you wish in life with no consequences. Whereas I have many expectations thrust upon my shoulders, things I do not wish to even consider. And even now, *you* are demanding something of me because you know I cannot refuse lest I wish to tarnish my reputation.”

Silver eyes traveled across her face in silence, “You know of a rake, not me, Miss Granger. Perhaps I am those things, perhaps I’m not,” He stepped forward, “But it is unfair to judge so

harshly. You know you cannot ignore the card now, so have this one dance with me and be free of my *vexatious* presence.”

Hermione looked away from him as she briefly clenched her hand at her side, exhaling sharply through her nose as she looked back at him. “Fine. I will give you but one dance, Your Grace.”

Just one dance was all she had to commit to for this evening and she could retire to the Weasley’s drawing room, escape from these frivolities and formalities. She could put up a front for that, at least. The hum of music reached her ears and she inwardly groaned.

The Duke held a hand out to her as the violin strummed the first chords of the song. She hesitated a brief moment before settling her gloved hand into his, his fingers closing around hers. She looked up at him over their hands as he gently tugged her to the center of the room to join the other dancers as they lined up. She heard a murmur ripple through the witches and wizards around her.

This was a mistake, she realized.

Suddenly she was thrust into the limelight, torn from the shadows she normally lurked. Visible because the damned *Duke* of Wiltshire had claimed her for a dance.

The dance began and the wizard stepped forward, his hand coming to rest on the middle of her back as he held the other aloft to the side. He pulled her towards him, just a breath closer than she would have preferred, as she settled her palm against his shoulder. Her heart leapt in her throat; she hated to dance.

It was not something she was accomplished at. Harry and Ron humored her, saved her from embarrassment by leading her through the steps. They hid their wincing when she trod on their toes, waving aside her apologies.

Before she could even gather her thoughts, plan out her steps, the Duke had moved her through the first steps of the dance. The hand on her back guided her, turning her through each move with a flawless grace she normally did not possess. His hand was warm on hers, their skin only separated by the silk of her glove.

The room seemed to spin away with each turn as she became focused on her steps, the way he moved her. It felt as though every eye was on her, but yet, none at all. A part of her felt as though she was being studied, criticized; and at the same time, it mattered not. She felt no judgment from *him*.

And she hated that the Duke had been right; dancing with him was unlike anyone else she had danced with before.

It was almost *enjoyable*.

The dance drew an end and he released her, bowing over her hand with a faint smirk as his eyes rose to meet hers. She felt flushed, breathless from the dance that had taken her out of her comfort zone and thrust into a different realm.

“And you only trod on my toes once,” The Duke murmured against her knuckles.

“Yes, well...” Hermione hastily pulled her hand away from him as she felt the color heightening in her cheeks. “It seems our obligation to one another has been fulfilled. I bid you good evening, Your Grace.”

She barely dipped a curtsy before briskly walking away from him, catching a glass of champagne off a tray as it drifted past her. Hermione glanced over her shoulder at the Duke, where he remained on the dance floor. His silver eyes followed her, and perhaps those of the people around her. But she needed to get away from them, *him*.

This wasn't where she wanted to be.

She needed to disappear, to sink back amongst the forgotten and unnoticed.

Hermione made her way down the hallway of the moderately sized manor to the study she knew was hidden at the end of the hall, a place she frequented during her visits. It was no grand library, but it was an escape.

And one she desperately needed.

Her solitude was short-lived as she was joined by not only Ginny, but Harry. Quite the pair, always pushing her out of her comfort zone. Requesting Hermione join them during the soirees and balls.

Like now, Ginny had requested Hermione to join her while she went out to *promenade* around the estate. She rather disliked the entire affair that was merely an extravagant way to take a not-so-leisurely stroll along the river or town center. It was just a way to flaunt one's wealth and status, the flutter lashes and wave about wands in a ridiculous manner. Most of the men came off like a bunch of peacocks, strutting about to garnish the attention of a bloody mate and the witches used it as a chance to show off the latest fashions; usually some near scandalous gown, fresh from Paris.

They were exhausting.

But what could one expect from a meddling witch and a Marquis who thought he knew what was best for everyone? Harry was younger than Hermione and many times he acted as if he were her elder merely because he held a title and he felt some ridiculous need to micromanage her life; insisting she should wed to secure her future.

‘You can't always ride your parents coattails,’ he would say.

'Just imagine-- if you marry into wealth, you can buy as many silly books as you want,' Ginny insisted.

She did that just fine on her own.

And they both *knew* she had no desire to marry.

But she was like a bloody pet project to them.

Hermione slammed her book shut as she realized they intended to linger, lifting her eyes to look at them, "What do I owe this pleasure of you two meddling arseholes?"

"Hermione," Harry scolded her as he shut the door almost entirely, leaving it open just a crack for propriety's sake. "You cannot be swearing in such a manner."

She rolled her eyes as she leaned back in her chair, setting her book on the side table lightly. She let out an exaggerated sigh as she pressed her fingers to her brow, "As if I *care* about what someone might think of me should they overhear my words? They should probably learn to mind their ears and keep to themselves."

Harry ignored her as he continued to speak, "I know you have no intentions to wed—"

Ginny chimed in with a smirk, "The Duke seems interested." Hermione shot her a dark glare and her smirk only grew wider in response.

The wizard continued his rant, Hermione barely restraining from another eye roll as she drummed her fingers against the arm of the settee, "—But you still *must* mind your reputation. Even if you wish to become a spinster like you so vehemently claim, you will be held to the esteem of your peers and required—"

"I don't plan to stay in London," Hermione said firmly as she looked at Harry. May as well come clean on that front.

His brows drew together behind the frames of his glasses that perched upon his nose, his green eyes darkening with his frown, "Excuse me?"

Hermione despised when he took on that tone; not quite condescending, but one he had learned to use on members of the ton when he felt above them. It was the tone many wizards of high social standing took when they were displeased. She found it atrocious and it immediately raised her hackles. It was the voice he adopted in situations where he felt as if he were *responsible* for her. A tone used by others when she politely turned down dances or refused a drink.

As an only child, they had become close and formed a pseudo-family between the two of them, similar to that of siblings. Most of the time it benefited them both, sometimes it did not.

This was one of those instances.

“I said,” She rose to her feet as she looked at him, “I am leaving London. Once the season is done, I can be free of this place and the restrictions foisted upon me.”

He was shaking his head at her in disbelief, “You cannot leave—”

Hermione felt a faint spark of magic bouncing between her fingers as her irritation spiked, “You are not my brother nor my father. You *cannot* command me to do anything.”

“I bloody well can,” Harry said firmly as he stepped towards her, his finger waving through the air in the most irritating fashion, “I may not be your blood but you are my friend. A woman— witch or otherwise— simply can not go traipsing the countryside without a male attendant. It's unheard of and dangerous.”

Ginny— *bless her*— was quick to break her silence and come to Hermione's defense, “Harry, she is right. You may be her friend and you have every right to be *concerned* for her safety, but you cannot order her about.”

The raven haired wizard scoffed loudly as he glanced towards their friend as she loitered by the doorway.

“If you are planning to leave London, what are you doing in the arms of the Duke? Everyone — and I mean *everyone*— saw it,” Harry had folded his arms across his chest, straightening to his full height.

She was hardly one to back down from imposing figures, having become used to them at a young age. Growing up with a Marquis and Baron as her friends had emboldened her and made her stand tall rather than simper and cow like other missus.

“He dances with many witches,” Hermione pointed out as she mimicked his stance, crossing her arms as she lifted her brows at him.

Harry didn't relent as he bit out, “The Duke, *Malfoy*, dances with witches because they request it of *him*. Not the other way around. Don't be naive and think for a moment that it was not noticed. Because it was.”

Hermione scoffed as she looked away from him, “It matters not. 'Tis a simple dance and we are done. He had happened upon me in the library—“

“You were alone with *him*? Hermione, you are playing with fire now. He is a notorious rake,” Harry scolded her as he crossed the room to stand in front of her, forcing her attention to return to him.

She was faintly aware of Ginny, lingering by the door and positively gleaming over the fact that Hermione would be alone with a man of such an *infamous* reputation. Half the town wanted the wizard, the other half envied him. Hermione knew the witch was going to pick at her mind the first opportunity she got alone with her.

Not that there was anything to share, as nothing had happened.

“Nothing happened. I immediately left the room,” She ground out as she lifted her chin, “I assure you, my *reputation* is intact. Untarnished.” She folded her arms as she jerked her chin towards the redhead, her brow arching, “Besides, must I point out that you came here, *alone*, with Ginny?”

The witch in question grew red as she sputtered, Harry waving a dismissive hand to the remark.

His hands came to lightly grip her upper arms, “I’m not concerned about *that*, Hermione. I know you too well to ever think you would— What I mean to say is that he is a man of... You know what, it doesn’t matter. You said nothing has occurred and I believe you. But you know what I believe will not matter; an unmarried woman, alone with a man? To top it off, alone with *the Duke*? I must warn you to stay away from him. If you do not, rumors will spread, far more quickly than they already are.”

“I doubt that will be an issue, Harry. The man vexes me,” She replied lightly.

Releasing her arms, he let out a quiet chuckle. His green eyes sparkled with barely contained amusement, gone the look he had borne earlier; “Of course he does. Is there no one that doesn’t?”

“Far and few between,” Hermione admitted with a barely contained smirk.

Draco exited the dance floor to make his way to the sideboard, feeling an odd sense of curiosity about the witch who so blatantly ignored his usual charm. He found it both irritating and intriguing. As the sole heir of the entire Malfoy fortune, Draco garnered attention from almost everyone. Those eager to make his acquaintance, befriend him, earn his respect or try to win his affection. Witches fawned over him, hoping to gain his favor. Everyone knew his name and title.

Or so he had thought.

Apparently this witch, Miss Granger, did not nor did she care to learn it.

How curious.

Why would a young woman have no interest in him? It was expected of them; to try to find a favorable match. A wizard in high social standing, such as himself. But she had treated the entire situation like a nuisance. Unless she did not seek a marriage? He pondered this, mulling it over. Granger seemed almost haughty in her disdain towards him. Perhaps she was a mistress to one of the other lords? It could be plausible; most witches who were promised

to another were quiet about their arrangements. She could be content and comfortable in such a situation, annoyed by his advances because she felt she didn't need them.

If that was the case, whose mistress was she?

Unless he was miscalculating and she simply did not feel the need to marry. Was she set in life that she was not expected to wed? She would be one of the first witches he had met who did not seek it. It raised more questions than answers and he was curious to figure out what made her tick.

As he picked up a flute of champagne, he found his attention immediately stolen away as a matron pushed her blushing daughter towards him, her words falling on deaf ears as he flashed his usual polite smile.

He didn't give a fig about this witch, no matter how endearingly *cute* she may be. All rosy cheeks and anxious fidgeting energy.

None of that befitted him, nor a Duchess.

If he were to be looking for one, *which he was not*.

He knew they were angling for a spot on his dance card, hoping a Duke would grant them the *honor* of it. He took a delicate sip of his champagne as he let his eyes roam away from them.

"I apologize, my card is filled for this evening. Perhaps next time," Draco replied coolly, slanting a look at the witch. He had no intention of adding her to the list of eager witches *next time* and he hoped his curt tone would dissuade her from hunting him down at the next event.

She could hassle another one of the Lords.

Like the Viscount, Theodore. He adored the attention, positively thriving from it.

Speak of the devil, Draco mused to himself as he spied said lord. The brunette wizard was tall, lean and unmistakable as he sauntered his way through the throng of hungry mamas and debutantes. Hazel eyes spotted him and the Viscount veered in his direction.

"Wiltshire," Theo greeted him with a slow smile.

Draco frowned; he hated being called by his title. The correction was automatic; "Malfoy."

"I'm aware of who you are," Theo said as he slipped next to him with a bored expression, "but I know you despise the attention. So of course I am going to use it. *Every. Chance. I. Get.* "

"What can I do for you, Nott?" Draco asked the brunette wizard, "I'm no fool to think you're here for my company."

With the death of his father, the Viscount had disappeared into the world for the past year as he traveled abroad. The wizard had been in harsh denial of the responsibilities that were thrust upon him, leaving his estate in a mild unrest. He had only recently returned, rekindling

their lifelong friendship. Theo had never been close to his father as Draco had been, so the man had leaned heavily on Draco for the last several weeks to learn how to run an entire estate and household.

“I just find myself curious as to the name of the new debutante you were dancing with,” Theo replied lightly, his brows raising slightly. “She does not appear to be one of your usual.”

“She is not necessarily a debutante,” He replied lightly as his eyes scanned the crowd to see if the witch in question had truly slipped away. She was not a young witch, fresh to the marriage mart. Her attitude indicated this was not her first year either; she seemed to know the lay of the various manors, which meant she had attended balls and soirees from previous years. She had realized the annoying quirks of the dance cards. The direct, yet polite, way to shut down advances. She was one to two years past being a fresh debutante; the witch had faded into being a wallflower, unnoticed. Easily overlooked and missed. “Her name is Miss Hermione Granger, though she did not divulge her name to me willingly.”

As if her marital status made a difference to either of them. They were known as rakes for a reason. While they— Theo and Draco— generally did not chase after the inexperienced witches, there was something intriguing about one who did not throw herself at their feet.

Theo tapped his fingers against the neck of his wine glass, his lips pursed in thought, “*Hmm*, praytell... Why can I not picture her before now? Is she new to the ton?” For the life of him, he could not remember ever seeing the witch prior. Where had she been hiding this entire time? True, Theo had been absent for the last year while he had traveled abroad. But if she was not a debutante, their paths should have crossed before now.

Draco snorted slightly, “Hardly. Apparently she’s been here this entire time.” At the wizard's confused expression, he continued, “She prefers to remain unnoticed.”

“Well, she certainly has succeeded in that aspect,” Theo muttered absentmindedly. He was studying Draco, lost in thought.

He couldn't help but wonder how Draco— the wizard known for blatantly *ignoring* witches in favor of keeping a mistress and entertaining women of loose reputation— had noticed Granger. If she was a wallflower, how had he picked her out amongst all the other eager blooms? What was it about *this witch* that had caught his friends' attention? From the glimpse of her Theo had, she was hardly an extraordinary beauty. Not plain, but subtle. A quiet kind of grace.

“That she has,” Draco agreed as he knocked back his glass, the smooth liquid slipping down his throat. He waited until a tray flitted past, setting the empty cup down on it.

Draco's interest in a witch who did not seem to return fascinated Theo.

Because Draco Malfoy did not chase women. They threw themselves at him and he took what they offered.

All except one, it seemed.

“A wager, then?” The wizard asked suddenly, his hazel eyes glinting mischievously. Theodore had a one track mind when it came to young witches, so the wager was not hard to guess. “Ten thousand galleons to the one who wins *Miss Granger’s* attention.”

“I have no intention of wedding—”

Theo scoffed, “I didn’t say *marriage*, did I? No proposal necessary for this.”

Draco rolled his eyes as he looked at his friend, “You have no idea what you’re gambling. You have not met this witch yet. She is obstinate—”

“I love a challenge.”

“And *highly* opinionated.”

“Even better. These other debutantes—” Theo lifted his glass at a passing pair of witches, a pleasant smile on his face as he lowered his voice, “I find are too easy. Boring, even. They throw themselves at us.”

“Are you complaining about your conquests?” Draco arched a skeptical brow at the brunette.

He looked at his nearly empty glass, countering with a snarky; “Are you complaining about a challenge?”

Draco was silent for a beat of moment as he considered what Theo was gambling; it certainly had an appeal. He was rather interested in the fact that this witch apparently held no interest in him or any other members of society. As if she had no interest in marriage, just like him. But as he had thought earlier, there had to be a reason behind it. No witch just opted to live a lonely existence without just cause.

“Very well, count me in.”

The Viscount

~*~

Avid Readers of the Ton;

How long can a flower remain hidden before it must bloom?

*And how long can that bloom remain
untouched, unnoticed?*

*We know that all flowers attract something;
whether that be a graceful butterfly or a stinging wasp?*

This season has presented us with many new faces;

*Some that are eager to be plucked and
others with thorns ready to draw blood.*

*Always yours,
Lady Quibbler*

~*~

Hermione rolled her wand between her fingers, the magically summoned umbrella above her head spinning in time with each spin of her wand. It was not raining, but she found that carrying an umbrella could be a lovely deterrent from unwanted interruptions, as well as shielding her friend's fair skin. She walked behind her parents, her arm linked with Ginny's. Both of the Grangers worked in the Muggle medical field, her mother breaking stereotypes left and right about a woman's place being in the home.

Her mother was Hermione's idol.

While she may not be a witch, she has managed to overcome many barriers. All on her own, with that brilliant mind of hers.

One that had also been passed on to Hermione.

Perhaps that was why her father continuously bought her books instead of gowns, and why they encouraged her to continue her education, magical and otherwise. Of course, they still wished for her to make a match; any respectable young lady should marry. But their match was one of love, and she knew they hoped she would find hers.

Little did they know that she didn't intend to find a husband at all.

“Sooo,” Ginny said in a quiet voice, “The Duke—”

Hermione slanted her a look in warning, her tone scolding, “There is nothing to say about that matter.”

“Oh, so your interaction is ‘a *matter*’ now, is it? Now I am curious,” Ginny replied lightly as she swung her skirts about her ankles, spinning to stand in front of Hermione. She ground to a halt, looking at the brilliantly red haired witch before her. Her blue eyes sparkled brightly in the sunlight, and her lips twitched in amusement. “Do tell me why he sat next to you at the luncheon yesterday.”

Hermione twirled her umbrella again as she narrowed her eyes on the witch, “To annoy me.”

“But I thought no one could get under your skin?” Ginny pointed out with a lift of her brows, her hands upon her hips in an unladylike fashion.

Hermione cast a glance over Ginny’s shoulder to her parents, who were drawing further away from them, “When he happened upon me in the library—“

“Yes, I’m still waiting for details on that,” Ginny mentioned with a smirk.

“—He thought it was all good fun to sign my dance card. He said something about suffering together.”

“Is that why the damned thing was going off all morning?” Ginny’s eyes grew wider with a sudden understanding, “You were ignoring the card. He effectively forced your hand, didn’t he?”

It had been the one and only time someone had managed to catch her off guard on that aspect. Most gentlemen approached her publicly to get her to agree to a dance. In fact, the rake's entire presence had caught her unaware when he had interrupted her solitude in the library. Most of his standing didn’t just endure the attention afforded to them given their rank, but thrived on it.

Hermione had yet to figure out what the Duke would have been doing in such a subdued atmosphere as the library.

Not that she was wondering.

“I only conceded to a dance so his name would cross off and I could be rid of him,” Hermione said as she quickly grabbed Ginny’s arm and forced her to fall into step beside her.

“And now the town is abuzz with interest over the Duke’s latest debutante—”

“I’m *not* a debutante,” Hermione pointed out.

Coming onto her third season, she was fading into obscurity. Or so she had so she had hoped. Indeed, as she swept her eyes around them at the loitering witches and wizards, she noted with a sinking feeling that more eyes followed them than normal.

“Hermione, you never even had a ball to announce your entrance into society. You’re as good as *fresh meat* out here,” Ginny replied lightly with a smirk. Only she would compare another witch to a hunk of flesh and only Hermione would remain unaffected by such a statement.

“That was intentional,” She stated as they moved along the path.

It had not been entirely of her own choice, but rather a financial one. Cotillions cost a small fortune, and while her parents had claimed they wished to throw her her own soiree, they had been relieved to hear she did not expect it.

Which had suited her perfectly.

All the better to remain nameless.

The sound of hooves along the path behind them caused the pair to step into the grass to allow the rider to pass. Instead, a horse black as night was reined to a halt beside them and Hermione drew her eyes away from the dragon hide boot tucked into the stirrup, which was molded to a shapely calf, to look up at the wizard. Perched in the saddle was a handsome man, close in age to her. His brunette hair was longer than currently fashionable, the waves brushed back from his face with a gloved hand as he flashed a smile down at her. His hazel eyes seemed to sparkle in the sunlight as he tipped his head in greeting.

“Miss Granger, I presume?” The brunette wizard inquired.

Any polite smile that may have adorned her immediately fell away at her name. She could count on her hands how many times over the last few years she had been recognized in public by potential suitors. Her facade was apparently beginning to falter.

Ginny’s didn’t miss a beat, “Yes, this is Hermione and I’m—”

The man turned his smile her way, “Miss Ginevra Weasley, correct?”

A highborn, Hermione immediately recognized. They spent their entire lives learning the names of their peers. It was expected of them. She, on the other hand, had no idea who this man was and a part of her did not wish to learn it. She cast a glance at her companion, wondering if the witch would be able to shed some light. Hermione would like to know whom to look out for in the future, whom to *avoid*.

“Ginny, is fine,” The redhead replied lightly and Hermione dug her elbow into her ribs.

First name usage was frowned upon unless you were related or quite close to said person; by marriage or friendship. Ginny was neither of these to this man.

“Will you be in attendance at the ball hosted by the Parkinson's this upcoming weekend?” The man asked as his horse tossed its head, looking pointedly towards Hermione at his question.

She couldn’t stop herself as she folded her arms across her chest, “What matter of it is to you?”

An elbow cracked her in the ribs.

The man's smile never faltered but a brow arched ever so slightly, "I will assume that means you *will* be there. I'll find you. Have a lovely evening, Miss Granger. Miss Weasley."

Before either could respond, he spurred his horse down the path and away from them. The man was clearly known amongst the others who were on the promenade, waving at them in greeting. Ginny's hand returned to Hermione's arm, her gloved fingers gripping her sleeve tightly as she tugged on it.

"That, my darling friend, was the *Viscount* of Nott Estate," Ginny said in a hushed voice, turning to follow his receding form with wide eyes. "If you don't want to dance with him, I *do*."

The Parkinson's townhome was impressive, to say the least. It was easily one of Hermione's favorites to visit when she had no other option but to attend. It was nowhere near as large as the Malfoy Manor, but quite stately for being a building nestled into the heart of London. The place was grandly decorated, candles bobbing about through the air lazily, a swell of music coming from some far corner of the ballroom. They had even gone as far as to charm flower petals to drift through the air like snow, repeating the cycle continuously.

It was all beautiful and charming.

And Hermione swept by it all as she made a beeline towards the hallway that ducked off one side.

Just as she had learned the layout of the other manors and townhomes, she knew just where to find the library here. The relatively large chamber was tucked at the end of the home, the room filled with rich woods and tomes from decades long past.

The Parkinsons, while notably one of the oldest and richest wizarding families, were also some of the most brilliant. Their daughter, Pansy, was arguably one of the more intelligent witches Hermione knew. While she was keen to marry just as any other debutante, she was skilled in Potions beyond what even Hermione was capable of.

Which meant that their library was filled with books of just that subject.

Hermione slipped her wand from her pocket as she tucked her dance card away— keen to avoid any situations like last time— and illuminated her way as she pushed the heavy door open. The glow from her wand fell across the tiled floors, and her heels clicked quietly as she gently shut the door behind her. Most did not venture to a *library* whilst a ball was in full swing, so the torches remained dark and the chamber unlit.

Which suited *her* just fine.

She slipped like a shadow amongst the shelves, her eyes scanning the shelves for something to leap out at her. Hermione finally plucked an untitled tome from the shelf but when she whirled around, eager to dig into its contents, she slammed hard into an immovable wall. Her wand clattered away as she nearly dropped the book, cursing under her breath.

Warm hands caught her elbows, steadying her before she could topple backwards, “Miss Granger.”

She squinted through the sudden dark as the light of her wand flickered out, “Your Grace?”

“Indeed,” The Duke’s chuckle sent a thrill through her, his fingers lingering a moment too long on her arms as she found herself flattened against his chest from her impact. She blinked owlishly at him as she bit back a groan.

“Oh, *bloody hell*,” Hermione muttered aloud as she hurriedly stepped back, tearing her eyes from him to try to locate her wand. “I’m here trying to escape your ilk.”

“And I’m here trying to—”

“Stalk me, obviously.” She had shoved her book into his hands and turned away, crouching down to try to spot the narrow piece of wood against the dark tile. With only one large window flanking the wall, the light was minimal at best. She may as well have been blindfolded.

“I am not, I *assure you*,” The Duke chimed in from somewhere behind her, “I am biding my time before returning to that crush where I’ll have these witches foisted upon me like starving wolves—”

Hermione was on her hands and knees, her fingers sliding back and forth across the tile now as she shuffled forward. She bunched her skirts around her knees, cursing the dreaded designs she had to endure wearing for society, “It’s rather cute you think they are *starving* for you like you’re some prime hunk of meat.”

The click of his shoes against the tile indicated he was pacing behind her, “You do not have a filter, do you?”

“I do not,” Hermione agreed wholeheartedly as she shuffled forward along the ground.

“Insolence isn’t becoming of a young witch. I’m assuming no one has told you this?”

She paused if only for a moment, shrugging a shoulder as she glanced back towards him. He was almost fully cast in shadows, even his brilliant white blond hair nearly imperceivable through the dark. He was just behind her now, close enough that the polished toes of his shoes could brush the hem of her dress. She tugged the fabric away from being trod upon.

Hermione looked away with a sniff, “You seem to be under the impression I am unaware of this and that I care. You know, instead of just lurking back there like some *creep*, you could use your wand and help me.”

“I’m rather enjoying watching you down there. I doubt it’s often you find yourself on your hands and knees,” she could tell he spoke the words with a smirk, his voice a low timbre that sent an odd sensation of heat through her.

Hermione scoffed loudly, unsure of how she was supposed to respond to such a claim. She was sure he was making a lewd joke and she was just missing it from her lack of experience. But she wasn’t about to let him become aware of this as she prided herself on having knowledge. She also loathed the fact that he was watching her crawl about the floor in search of her wand.

Her fingers finally found the piece of wood, the tip bursting to light as her hand closed around it. She pushed herself to her feet, half expecting the Duke to offer his hand. When he didn’t, she was torn between offense at his apparent lack of manners and relief that she could avoid his touch.

“Right, well,” Hermione shook out her skirts as she spun to face him, “Looks like it’s time for you to leave.”

She looked expectantly towards the door, motioning towards it with her wand. The Duke didn’t move as he looked down at her. The light from her wand illuminated him, the rest of the room seeming to fall further into darkness. His white blond hair seemed to have an ethereal glow, his skin like porcelain. But that is not what caught her attention; his *eyes* were like mercury, his pupils constricting as the light fell upon them.

A smirk hovered on his lips, “I do believe I was here first, Miss Granger. So that means it is *you* who must excuse yourself. I’m sure you can find the door.” He stepped aside, waving a hand behind him with a lift of his brows.

What a prick.

“Hah, I don’t think so. This library is large enough for the *both* of us,” Hermione had no intention of admitting to him that she was actively avoiding another wizard who had more or less claimed some of her precious time.

A Viscount, no less.

Those silver eyes narrowed slightly on her, “But what would happen if you were found here in this library? *Alone*? With a *man*?”

His bored drawl annoyed her further.

“Go *open* the door and we will be fine,” She replied lightly, flicking her wand in the direction of said doorway. At bare minimum, they could be alone with the door being cracked open. It alluded to a sense of propriety. It wasn’t entirely appropriate, but a loophole of expectations.

She swore she caught a glimpse of his tongue as he ran it across the front of his teeth, catching it on the point of his incisor, “I don’t think you quite understand, Miss Granger. I am a *rake*—“

"I don't care if you were the bloody Pope. Go open the door and let me go about my business, and you go about yours."

Hermione knew she was playing with fire as she raised her brows, daring him to argue further. He made a clicking sound with his tongue as he turned on his heel, crossing the room to the door. His wand appeared in his hand as he reached for the handle, pointed squarely at her.

"If you try to cast me from this space I will hex you," The Duke warned quietly.

The thought had crossed her mind, good on him for being at least mindful enough to be aware of this. Her internal clock was ticking and she was suddenly aware they had already spent a copious amount of time *alone*.

"Get on with it, Your Grace, I wish to read. 'Tis why I'm here in the first place," Hermione waited as he pulled the door open a foot, light flooding into the space from just beyond in the hall. Satisfied, she tapped her toe against the ground until he returned to her side. He held out her book and she plucked it from his fingers.

"Potions?" The Duke lifted a brow at her as he glanced down at the title.

She felt her cheeks growing red, "Yes, well I must admit I am not as skilled with it as I wish to be, and the Parkinson's library has so much to offer in this study."

"Pansy does have a vast knowledge of the subject," He replied lightly. She glanced up at him at the use of the witches first name; it was a sign of close friendship or intimacy. They were not related, so likely the latter.

Unsurprising, of course.

"She does," Hermione admitted quietly, having always admired the dark haired witches' ease in understanding Potions. And perhaps a twinge of jealousy; she had once spied the laboratory that was kept down the hall. The sheer amount of ingredients available to the witch blew her mind. Her parents, while well off, had not been able to afford many of the additional luxuries such as having their own potions laboratory.

She decided to use this opportunity to step away from the Duke, moving towards the only window where she knew a chaise lounge awaited her. She dropped into the handsome piece of furniture that was covered in a horrendous plaited green pattern, tucking her wand into the delicate pile of hair atop her head. It looked silly, Hermione knew, but it was an effective way to light the pages she was reading. She curled her legs under her bum as she opened the book, holding it up to start at the beginning.

Instead, her eyes slipped up the page to look over the top of the book in the direction of her unwanted companion. His wand was alight, the glow sliding along the rows of books as he prowled the aisle in search of something to read for himself. The only sound that broke the silence was the subtle click of his shoes against the tile. She watched him, her brows knitting together as she pondered the absurdity of the situation. Why would a Wizard from such a

notable family— a *Duke*, no less— find solace in such a place as a library? Shouldn't the man be out *there*, swamped by desperate and eager witches?

Bloody hell, the git was pretty enough that he likely received attention from men as well.

Hermione scoffed to herself as she dropped her eyes back to the words before her. She should not concern herself with *him* and the going-ons in his life. It was no concern of hers. It shouldn't even pique her curiosity.

But it did.

She looked back down at her book, in an attempt to force her interest elsewhere. But the sound of a book sliding from its home caught her attention, and she glanced up again. He had finally found something to read, his wand held aloft as he made his way to a pair of chairs that were squirreled away into the corner, just inside the stream of light from the hall. He folded himself uncomfortably into the small chair, his legs stretched out in front of him as he crossed them at the ankles. The chair itself, while elegant, was rigid and confining for his lanky frame. She could see the subtle movements as he tried to squirm into a more comfortable position.

Serves him right for intruding upon her space.

Hermione sank further into the plush lounge chair with a smirk, stretching her legs out with a contented sigh. She knew he was watching and she delighted in rubbing it in his smug face that he had missed out on the preferred seating in the library. Opulent furniture didn't necessarily mean *comfortable*.

"Did you know," The Duke's voice drawled through the dark followed by the soft rustle of a page being turned, "Not only is this library big enough for the both of us, but so is that settee your derriere is so firmly planted on."

She bit back the surprised gasp at his words, the sound becoming strangled in her throat as she looked over the top of her book at him. Bathed in the light from the hallway, she could clearly make out his expression; one single dark brow arched in the most obnoxiously arrogant manner, a gentle fall of platinum hair across his forehead, and a quirk to the corner of his lips. Infuriating, is what it was. Not to mention, she swore he made an amused noise as he attempted to cover it with another page turn.

Hermione cleared her throat loudly, "Did *you know* that this library would be far quieter without you in it?"

"Likewise," He said, and she could see the corner of his lips as they curled into a smirk. His silver eyes met hers, "You're the one choking on your own air. It's rather loud."

The book in her hands slammed shut with a snap, "What is the real reason that you are hiding out in a library, Your Grace? Shouldn't you, of all wizards, be out *there*?" She gestured with the book in her hands towards the door, where the near silent din of the ball reached their ears.

The Duke merely continued to look at her from over his book, his brows furrowing ever so slightly. He made a quiet sound—perhaps a sigh—as he lowered the book to his lap, “I do believe I already mentioned this to you, but alas you seem to be forgetful—”

She scowled; *what a cad*—

He didn’t seem to notice her displeasure as he slowly closed his book, “—So I’ll repeat myself. Apparently you and I are the same—”

“I wouldn’t say that,” She muttered as he tapped the cover of the book lightly, his silver rings catching the light and drawing her attention to his hands briefly.

The Duke continued, “—In the fact that neither of us enjoy the company foisted upon us.”

Hermione pulled her gaze back up to his face hastily, “I believe that is the only thing we may have in common. *You* obviously enjoy it to some degree or another. Someone such as yourself doesn’t earn his reputation as such by being a pretty wallflower.”

He studied her for a quiet moment. His eyes were calculating, not quite cold but neither were they welcoming.

The Duke uncrossed his ankles as he straightened in his seat, “Perhaps you are right in that. I do enjoy the company of *certain* people when I wish to be with them.”

She wasn’t sure of what his words all entailed, but she knew his words held a heavier meaning. A more *debauched* one. She swallowed nervously as she looked down at her book, her fingers drumming the pages.. Sometimes Hermione hated that her gender meant that she had a limit in knowledge of certain areas— especially the ones that were being implied in this situation. She had gossiped aplenty with the few witches she held close, but none of them had any real experience beyond quick and awkward stolen kisses. Even Hermione had shared a chaste kiss with the Baron before, but beyond the faint butterflies she had felt she knew nothing of what the Duke was insinuating.

“Which is why you are a rake,” Hermione affirmed, more for herself than him.

“You could say that,” The Duke rose to his feet, “I find myself in the company of someone at this moment who I find rather intriguing.”

Hermione glanced up at him, realizing he was addressing *her* and he was closing the distance to where she sat. She cleared her throat as she glanced away from him, feeling a heat creeping along her cheeks, “You must have had too much to drink, Your Grace.”

“I haven’t had anything to drink, Miss Granger,” He replied lightly as his shoes clicked across the tile. He was about to enter her space, the light from her wand overpowering the light from the hallway and illuminating his face. He held a curious expression as he regarded her, “Merely stating a fact.”

“A terrible miscalculation on your part,” She laughed nervously as she rose to her feet, glancing towards the door, “I am neither intriguing nor interesting. So alas...I must be going.

I heard there is a dance awaiting me—”

“The Viscount?” The Duke drawled as he came to stop just before her, so close her skirts brushed the top of his shoes.

Hermione tugged her wand from her curls, the light extinguishing as she tucked it into the charmed pocket of her skirts, “Er. Yes. That’s the one. He happened upon me—”

“The Viscount is also a rake, I’m sure you are aware. Perhaps more so than I, even,” He had scoffed quietly, but the sound was gentle and more out of amusement than disappointment, “For one so firm to believe she doesn’t want attention, you seem to find it from the worst sort.”

“Right, well as I said...” Hermione started to shift towards the door, his position effectively blocking her legs against the chair, “I have to go find this wizard before I hurry home. I need to make an appearance at some point tonight.”

He didn’t move, “His name is Theodore. And if you find *my* presence annoying, you are going to *love* your time with him.”

“Delightful. I look forward to engaging in more unruly banter with another fop,” She muttered as she forced herself to inch forward and away from the settee, her skirts now brushing against his knees.

The Duke held out his book to her, the cover bound in a red leather. No words adorned the front or spine. She couldn’t read his expression in the low light as she glanced up at his face. She could have ignored it, brushed past the Duke and went about her night. But rather, she found herself lightly taking it from him, curious to see what he had been reading.

“Don’t open this here. Perhaps tuck it away in that pocket of yours,” He dipped his chin towards the hidden slit of her skirts, “but it’s merely some informational reading for you. You seem to be curious about things you cannot or would not venture to ask. This might help you. Find me when your curiosity is piqued.”

Hermione had intended to be the one to slip away but it was him who retreated first, “Your Grace?”

“You ask what it is I seek? Perhaps you’ll find that we want the same thing,” The Duke tapped a finger on the cover of the book before turning on his heel to exit the room, pulling the door open so the light flooded the dark library. He glanced at her once more before disappearing into the hall, leaving Hermione very confused— and curious— at what had just transpired.

A Formal Request

Out of *all* the books in the library, Draco didn't know what had possessed him to pluck *that one* off the shelf. It had been untitled, tucked away on a high away place between two large tomes. He had *known* what it was and had decided to grab it anyway. And then to hand it over to Miss Granger, a very decidedly virginal witch... he scoffed at himself.

What a bold move, even for him.

The witch had made it aplenty clear that she was *not interested* in forming any sort of attachment, with him or anyone else.

And neither was he.

But he could see a curiosity in her; times he would catch her looking at him, questioning, observing, judging. A general loathing, perhaps. But Draco could work with that.

Besides, he wasn't about to lose his wager to Theodore bloody Nott.

While Theo had no idea what he was up against, Draco did have an inkling to it. Miss Granger did *not* want marriage and would shut down any and all attempts at it. She was in search of something else, a freedom not easily won for a woman— witch or otherwise—in their society. A freedom that he may be able to offer her. Well, him and any of the other Lords could. He just needed to make sure it was *him* to present it to her.

As if on cue, his competition happened upon him.

"I do believe Miss Granger will be looking for you shortly," Draco informed him quietly as he waved a hand at a nearby tray. The silver platter drifted towards them and he swept a glass from it.

Theo followed suit, taking a sip from his own glass as he raised a brow, "And however would you know that?"

"Because I just left her in the library," Draco replied blithely, gesturing with his cup towards the hallway he had just departed.

"I do hope," Theo turned slightly towards Draco so that his words were private and for his ears only, "That you have not tarnished the witch, Your Grace. The game has barely begun."

He met the wizard's steady gaze, "Do you really think I would be so crass as to cause irreplaceable reputational damage to a young debutante? Not to mention *you* attempted to claim a dance from her before the first roll of the dice?"

Theo snorted slightly, "Firstly, you assured me that she is no *debutante*. And secondly, I saw no harm in meeting my quarry. You did warn me of her biting tongue, and I found myself curious to know just how sharp the barb is before she lashes me with it."

Draco bit the inside of his cheek, feeling a pang of some unnamed emotion at his friend's words. Words that he himself had said only days earlier. He looked down into the glass between his fingers, swirling the red liquid. He didn't know he would be worried as Theo hardly presented real competition to gaining favor from Granger. Undoubtedly she would spurn them both. The only edge Draco had, if any, was that he had met the witch prior to Theo. It was not much, but it had been enough for him to quickly gain a subtle understanding of her.

As if on cue, his attention was caught by the very witch they were discussing. She had slipped out from the hallway, her eyes darting about the room. Perhaps searching for him, or Theo. He wasn't sure. She had thrown herself to the wolves by daring to say she had a dance with the Viscount, and he had the feeling she would follow through on it. If merely to spite *him*.

There was no book in her hands, which meant she had either returned it to its home or tucked it into her pocket that was hidden amongst the layers of her skirt—one he had assumed she had charmed.

“Ah, there she is,” Theo pushed his glass into Draco's free hand, “Do hold this for me? I shan't be but a few moments.”

If that, Draco mused.

He planned to use this, raising her ire by the Viscount drawing even more attention to her, to further his own means.

Hermione had wanted to look at the book the Duke had given her, desperately so. Her curiosity had been aroused, but she had hurriedly shoved the depths of her pocket. It had easily disappeared into the extended depths, growing weightless as the magic engulfed it. After taking a moment to gather her wits about her, Hermione had exited the library to return to the ball. She could have slipped away, unnoticed, or easily returned home for the night. She had made her appearance by attending, after all.

But she had decided to bait the Duke with the fact she had been asked to dance by another highborn Lord. Why she had done such a silly thing, she was not sure. But annoyance had flashed in his silver eyes at her words, and perhaps something akin to a warning was issued.

Hermione had foolishly taken it as a challenge.

“Miss Granger,” The voice of the Viscount reached her and she turned to greet him.

“My Lord,” She responded as she dipped her head.

She assessed his appearance; finely dressed as any Lord, his jacket black and tailored perfectly to his broad shoulders. His shirt was white beneath it, the vest a lovely shade of emerald green. The cravat folded at his throat was also green, drawing out the low shades of colors in his eyes. If Hermione were indeed looking for a husband, he was someone that would draw her eye. But she was not and merely found his presence mildly annoying, despite that smile that slipped into place. One that was near impossible to ignore, nor one she could resist returning as her lips twitched in response.

“I’m glad to see you have decided to attend this evening,” The Viscount said warmly, a dimple appearing in one cheek. He held out his arm to her, a brow slipping up ever so slightly, as if he expected her rebuff. She conceded with a curious glance about them, slipping her fingers into the crook of his arm. She had expected a dance, “I just wish to take you for a turn about the room, if that’s alright? Perhaps a stop at the table for refreshments?”

Her eyes scanned the room, swinging back as she noticed the Duke off to one side. He was surrounded by witches, both young and old. Debutantes and ones of questionable reputations. He was unmistakable, as always. How had she never noticed him before now? Perhaps in an effort to disappear into obscurity, she had ducked her head so low she had missed some key players amongst the ton. Hermione had been able to identify him for *what* he was, but not *who* he was. A miscalculation on her part, and one she would not make again. The Duke noticed her attention and lifted a glass in her direction, a smirk playing on his face.

The Duke and Viscount were allies, she swiftly realized.

But of course, how could they not be? Most tended to be in the same circles, shared Governesses, attended the same educational facilities, and married into each other's families.

“Very well, My Lord,” Hermione finally replied, allowing him to steer her along the edge of the dance floor. As it was with the Duke, she could feel the attention of the other guests tracking them.

Hermione wanted to sink into the floor.

Her fingers gripped the Viscount’s sleeve, and his voice was quiet as he spoke to her, “Do explain to me how you’ve managed to go some two or three odd years without a single offer of marriage, My Lady.”

“Do not address me as that,” Hermione replied quietly, glancing his way. He was more subtle than the Duke, polite even. But that did not mean he was safe, “My parents do not have a peerage, My Lord. Miss is just fine.”

He flashed her a small smile, “I address all fair maidens—”

“Do stop there,” She said over him, ducking her head slightly to hide her exasperated expression. She scoffed, “We do not live in the Middle Age, I am not a *fair maiden*, nor do I wish to be identified as such.”

“So I’m expected to address you as Miss—”

Hermione interrupted him sharply as they neared the refreshment table, “Granger, that’s correct. Because that is my surname, which I would like to keep.”

The attention on them was increasing by the moment, and so was her vexation. She could feel all her carefully laid plans to *disappear* after this season started to fade away. Hermione had gone just over two years without much recognition. Two beautifully dull, quiet seasons. Most witches would be over the moon with the fact that not only one, but *two* potential suitors had appeared. Two very handsome, *titled*, Lords.

“My, you *do* have quite a fiery tongue, don’t you?” The Viscount settled his hand over hers where it rested upon his arm, his ungloved fingers warm against her.

Hermione turned to look at him, holding his gaze steadily. There would be no fluttering lashes, cooing or excited tittering from her, “Alas, you remain, My Lord.”

The Viscount turned slightly to the table, plucking up a flute of champagne and extending it to her. “Out of curiosity, perhaps.”

“A poor decision,” she ignored the glass, and reached for her own, now turning from him entirely.

“You seem to lack an interest in me...” He stepped towards her, his voice dropping for her ears only. She kept her eyes on the table before her, “And yet you have been alone twice with the Duke. It seems I’m not the only one who has had their curiosity kindled.”

Her eyes darted to his hazel ones at his statement, but there was no threat to his words. He was merely voicing an observation. It was an acknowledgement of something she had assumed would have remained between herself and the Duke.

Affirmation that he was indeed friends with this wizard.

“What’s your game, My Lord?” Hermione lifted a glass to her lips as she sought out the Duke amongst the crowd.

“It seems I may already be losing at it, so it matters not,” The Viscount said with a slight smile, “I bid you good afternoon, Miss Granger.”

He left her then, disappearing into the crowd and leaving her standing at the table. The group about them was abuzz with whispers of their exchange, but she knew the words between she and the Viscount had been quiet enough that they had remained unheard. But tongues would still waggle, eager for gossip.

Perched in the middle of her bed, Hermione gazed down at the plain book in her hands. It appeared just as any book she had seen before. Why had the Duke given it to her, borrowed from the Parkinson's library? She had assumed it first to be a Potions book, as that had been what she had mentioned to him. But a part of her knew it wasn't that.

She had stripped off her evening gown, clad only in her simple chemise for bed. Curled into her bed, amongst a mountain of pillows, was her preferred place to read.

Opening the cover, she found the first pages to be blank. There was no title, nor an author to indicate what she might find amongst the pages. Her curiosity gnawed hungrily at the lack of information, urging her to flip further into the book. She did what she usually avoided, letting the pages slip through the tips of her fingers in a cascade of paper until an image caught her eye. She backtracked to the image, her brows drawing together at what she *thought* she had seen.

The image was, as she had suspected, lewd. Perhaps not as detailed as a fine art painting in the museum, but artwork all the same. The woman was naked—Hermione felt herself blushing in embarrassment, and hastily looked away from the image to the man. He was also nude in the drawing.

Hermione had never seen a naked man. She had assumed they were similar to women to an extent, without the breasts of course. And she had only a small knowledge that men were *endowed* from the days in the country when she had visited a farm and caught sight of animals in heat. What she knew of mating also came from the farm animals, and it seemed entirely unenjoyable for the female, and merely a necessity for producing the next generation.

But the sight of the man in the image, kneeling between the woman's legs with his hand about his length—she had no idea what the term was for it—caused an odd sensation to curl through her body and she hastily slammed the book shut with a surprised sound.

In no way did that appear to be *primal*, nor a mere necessity. Everything about that picture made it appear intentional, as if they *wanted* it. Enjoyed it, even.

She stared down at the book, her heart racing at an uneven pace as blood rushed through her body. She felt flushed, heated. Just from a simple drawing. There had been words and her mind needed to know what they had said; a description? Would she learn the correct terms for... *that*? Did she really wish to know? This was a duty between a man and a wife, and she had no intention of marriage.

Hermione scooted to her headboard and glanced towards her door, locking it with a wave of her hand. She had learned wandless magic at a young age; mostly accidental usage, but she had learned to control it to the point where small tasks could be completed without a wand. Leaning back into the pillows, she drew her knees up and rested the book against the top of her thighs.

Reading such material as this was... inappropriate. Frowned upon. She could be disgraced for having such a thing in her possession.

But she also needed to know what it said. She hated that her knowledge was lacking.

Clearing her throat, she opened the book with a sense of purpose. The intent to expand her mind and learn about what happened between a man and a woman. She was an academic, afterall. If she didn't plan to marry, she could at least have this knowledge for her own satisfaction.

The first few paragraphs had color rising to her cheeks almost instantly, the words quickly escalating to describe an encounter with a woman. She quickly realized there was a bevy of names for the female anatomy; words ranged from *twat*, *muff*, *cunny*, and for some reason, the word *pussy* sent an odd thrill through her. Continuing with as much of a scientific mind as she could, she went on to find the names of the male counterpart; *jock*, *arrow*, *manhood*, and *cock*. She had always assumed the last word referred to the rooster, but apparently it meant more than just that.

Several pages into the erotic novel, there was a low heat deep in her pelvis. One she had never experienced before. It was like a curling sensation, beckoning to be touched, to be soothed.

The book, it seemed, came to her rescue on that.

Hermione was still trying to approach this as methodically as possible, but her mind started to drift from that. It was repeating the images she had seen, manipulating them in her mind. Teasing her, taunting. With things she had never imagined before. Her body was burning, aching to be *touched*.

Feeling an odd sense of shame at her arousal and her need to satisfy it, she hurriedly closed the book again. Hermione leaned over the edge of her bed, shoving it between the mattresses to hide it away. She dragged the blanket over her body, tucking herself between the sheets in an attempt to go to sleep, to close her mind to those forbidden images.

Thoughts that a lady should never have.

Late morning found Hermione in the small library of her parents' townhome. The room was humble in comparison to the others she enjoyed, yet the collection was vast enough to keep her occupied for days. Her father always bought her new books, and she had even resorted to stacking them neatly into piles on the floor. Her favorite chair, an oversized and overstuffed ugly chaise lounge, was situated beneath the arching window that looked out into the bustling street.

She was attempting to lose herself in one of her fathers medical journals— perhaps a poor choice, given the situation the previous night— when a light knock sounded at the door.

“Hermione,” Her mother’s voice sounded just before her head peered around the door. A curious expression was on her round face, “You have a gentleman caller.”

Hermione frowned at the words.

Sure, she had *a* caller before, in her first season. But none since then.

She held her mothers eager gaze for a moment longer before returning it to the book before her, “Send them away.”

Her mother let out an exasperated sigh, “No, Hermione. I’ve already let them in. He is just here—“ She opened the door and Hermione forced her gaze back up, “Waiting to see you.”

Her frown became a scowl as the Duke sauntered into the room, flashing her mother a charming smile that could melt a woman's heart. Her mother practically became a puddle beneath it.

Bloody hell.

The Duke, who seemed to be becoming a regular nuisance in her life, appeared as dashing as ever. If she cared about such things as one's appearance, she reminded herself firmly. His riding coat was a dark silver with golden satin trim, lavish and opulent. The colors highlighted his eyes, which she was sure he was aware of. His trousers were black, trimmed and fitted to hug thighs that could only be developed from time astride a horse or broom. She was not familiar with either, but Harry indulged in both sports. One hand was clasped about the neck of a dark wooden cane, atop which was an intricately carved silver snake head with eyes made of emeralds; the other held a bouquet of flowers.

Hermione shut her book with a snap and rose to her feet beneath her mothers sudden glare, biting the inside of her cheek as she turned to greet the blond wizard.

She ground out, “Your Grace. How... *lovely* to see you in our home. Unannounced. *Uninvited.*”

The Duke cast a glance about the small room, “It’s quaint, but it has some charm.”

She bristled at his barb— intentional or not— it vexed her enough that wanted to slap him and wipe that arrogant expression from his face.

“More charming than some,” Hermione waved a hand at her mother to dismiss her, “Thank you, Mother. I’ll take care of this.”

By getting him to run for the hills.

She was in no mood for his attention today, nor up for the banter required to keep him at arm's length.

“Hermione...” Her voice was a warning, veiled beneath a practiced smile, “Perhaps I’ll bring some refreshments.”

Before Hermione could inform her mother that they would not have time for tea and biscuits, the woman had already left the room in a flurry of motion and rustling of skirts. The door remained open, but only a crack. Her mother, it seemed, was as meddling a witch as Ginny, just without the magic.

The Duke crossed the room and held out an opulent bouquet of flowers— a collection of roses and peonies— before turning that smile on her. She begrudgingly took them, briefly took a moment to appreciate their beauty before promptly dropping the bundle onto the chair behind her as she held his gaze.

“Your mother is a Muggle?” The Duke asked, his expression falling ever so slightly as he watched her discarding his gift.

“Astute observation,” She stated coolly.

“Your father?”

“Also a Muggle,” Hermione’s tone was clipped; she adored her parents. She was the first witch in the family and they had been over the moon with excitement for her. Blessedly, their families had already been close to the Potters and Weasleys, both of which were actively involved in the Muggle community. According to her father, he had met the Marquis— Harry’s father, before his untimely death— at the races.

Their families had been close ever since.

Unfortunately her lack of wizarding bloodline tended to create an unpleasant chatter amongst the ton, which was why she avoided discussing it openly, and her parents tended to avoid balls and soirees. Instead they would send her alone or with one of their friends as a chaperone.

“How can I help you this evening, Your Grace?” Hermione finally asked as she clasped her hands in front of her, holding his gaze.

Perhaps with this new information, the Pureblooded fop would bolt.

“I’m fairly certain I heard your mother announce my reason for being here, but perhaps you weren’t listening—” The Duke’s smile shifted into a smirk, “To call on you, of course.”

“I thought I made it abundantly clear that I do not wish to be bothered,” Hermione replied tightly.

He looked down at his hand as he casually adjusted one of the silver rings, the M catching the light from the window. Or perhaps it was a W, for Wilshire. She didn’t know, nor did she care. She dragged her attention back to his face as he spoke again.

“I thought that *I* had made it abundantly clear that I do not give a fu— *ahem*, that I do not care?”

If he had thought his near-slip of an impolite word would offend her, the Duke was mistaken.

She decided to let a small smile slip onto her face as she replied, “I promise, swears do not harm my *genteel* ears, Your Grace. I would rather encourage them, you see. Freedom of expression, I’m sure you understand.”

The Duke glanced at her and for a brief moment and his brows drew together over those eyes made of molten steel. “You become more of a mystery every time we meet.”

“A mystery best forgotten, Your Grace,” Hermione glanced at the partially closed door as her voice dropped, digging her hand into her pocket to withdraw the book he had given her the other day, “Along with this.”

Hermione held the offensive book out to him, trying her best to ignore the faint flush she felt creeping across her cheeks. He didn’t even look down at it as a smirk danced across his lips.

“You read it, I presume?” His tone was indulging, deep. The timbre of his voice was oddly titillating and his question... A faint heat curled through her.

She forced herself to scowl at him, “Absolutely not. Why would I read such filth?”

His smirk only grew as he took the book from her, opening the tome about halfway before he spoke again, “If you didn’t read it, how would you know it was *filth*? Hmm?”

Merde, she had been caught in her own lie.

Hermione tried to keep her eyes firmly on his face but found herself growing anxious, looking away as her body grew warm under his gaze. The picture on display between them was lewd, the man’s hands on the woman’s naked body, *touching* her in places that Hermione couldn’t imagine being explored so intimately.

She cleared her throat as she fidgeted with her skirts, “A glance, Your Grace.”

“At the images? Or the passages themselves? I find some of these to be quite elaborate in detail,” Malfoy said quietly, his words barely above a whisper. He had shifted almost imperceptible closer to her as well, her skirts now brushing against his thighs.

“I’m not sure why you would find this suitable to give to me—” She started as she glanced down at the book.

“Because I have a proposition for you.”

Her eyes immediately flew to his, questions racing through her mind. Surely he had not come here with some silly notion to propose? She was fairly certain she had told him that she was *not* interested in such a thing. A hard refusal was all he was going to find waiting for him here.

“I’m not interested,” Hermione replied firmly, ignoring the faint fluttering of her pulse as he held her gaze. She snapped the book shut in his hands, trying to seal off her embarrassment at

such a thing and finalize her decision. She pressed the book against his chest, lifting her brows in a silent demand.

The Duke let out a low chuckle, “You can’t dismiss it without even hearing what my offer is.”

She shoved the book against his chest harder, biting back the faint annoyance as she frowned, “I assure you, it is nothing I have any interest in. You have been a relentless thorn in my side, you vex me, and I would appreciate it if you just—”

“I am formally requesting to take you as my Mistress.”

Perhaps, A Misstep On His Part

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~*~

Whispering Readers;

*Do my eyes deceive me?
Has the Duke of Wilshire, notorious rake, Really set his cap on a young Lady?
We have spied the young Malfoy with Miss Granger, not just once but twice thus far.
Is it merely our hopeful hearts that he may finally be ready to set aside his rakish ways, or
has his attention truly been caught by
this prickly wallflower?
As one of the most eligible bachelors of London,
This writer is curious to see what is mere gossip and what is truth.*

As always,

Lady Quibbler

~*~

Time stood still for a moment as his words hung heavily in the air. A forbidden request, if any had ever been spoken. Well, not to him. Draco had had mistresses before, dalliances with other witches. He found the direct route to be the most effective.

That is, in *most cases*.

He could see the moment Granger's surprise turned to confusion, and then rapidly boiled over into anger. His words had caught her off guard, true, but it had only taken a few seconds for her mind to swiftly realize exactly what he was asking of her.

The silence was broken as the door of the library swung open with enough force to bounce off the wall, opened without hands as her frustration caused her magic to lash out.

“Get out,” She snapped as she took a step back from him, pointing at the open door behind them.

“You haven’t even heard—“ Draco tried to interject.

“I’ve heard more than enough. Get. *Out.*”

Draco realized he had miscalculated; Miss Granger was not like other witches and he would have to appeal to her senses, not her wallet or body. It wouldn’t matter what curiosities his book had stoked within her, because her mind would shut them down.

“I meant no offense, Miss Granger,” He said quietly, taking a step back to give her the space she so clearly needed as her magic continued to hum dangerously around them. “Do you know what such an opportunity affords you?”

She let out a cold laugh as she mocked him, “*Opportunity?* Is that what you call it? I hardly think being a man’s—” her voice dropped to barely above a whisper, the words scathing, “— *scarlet woman* is something to boast about!”

“A mistress is vastly different from the notion of some loose slag,” Draco replied lightly, holding a hand up as she bristled again. “A proper mistress is taken care of by her Paramour —”

“*Paramour?*” Granger scoffed as she crossed her arms, looking away from him with an irate huff.

“Yes, that’s the correct term. I figured you would appreciate gaining accurate knowledge of the subject,” Draco watched her glance in his direction, “If you become *my* mistress, I will provide you with everything and anything. You will want for *naught*. You don’t have to marry to get what you desire, the security you *need* . You’ll be free to do as you wish. You want books? Fill your townhome floor to ceiling with books, you will have an unlimited monthly allowance. Whatever you want, it will be yours.”

Granger was silent as she continued to look at him, reading him. Her chest was rising in falling in shallow breaths, her jaw clenched as she tightened her arms about her waist.

“I will not become...” She bit the inside of her cheek, “I am not that kind of witch, Your Grace. I may not be as well off as others, nor do I wish to marry, but I cannot debauch myself in such a manner. ‘Tis shameful. It would ruin me and whatever reputation I have.”

Draco recognized the fact she had dug her heels in against the idea and there would be no convincing her in this moment. He had thought the concept would appeal to her; freedom that she so desperately seemed to seek under the protection only he, a Duke, could offer.

“I thought you did not concern yourself with such nuisances as minding your reputation or giving a care about what others think about you,” He said quietly. She slanted him a look as he rapped the butt of his cane against the wooden parquet floor lightly. “Perhaps I misjudged you.”

He knew he was tempting fate, her irritation, possibly fanning the flame by calling her out in such a manner. But Draco had to admit he enjoyed getting a rise from her, one of the few witches he had met who had no qualms about going toe to toe with him. In no way were the two things comparable; a lady's reputation was everything in their society. A mistress, lady or otherwise, had a shallow one. He had to tread with care here, because while she claimed she did not care about such frivolous things as her reputation, her actions spoke otherwise. Little remarks.

Without giving her the opportunity to respond, Draco turned sharply on his heel just as Mrs. Granger appeared in the open doorway, tray in hand and laden with tea and biscuits.

"Your Grace?" Mrs. Granger cast a confused glance towards her daughter, who was still obstinately standing with her arms crossed and her chin lifted.

"Unfortunately, I remembered I have a prior engagement I must attend to. But I must thank you for you and your daughter's time," Draco dipped his head towards the older woman, "Perhaps I will call again later this week."

"Oh uhm..." Mrs. Granger looked flustered as she looked up at him, "Of course, Your Grace. 'Tis no trouble at all. Let me—"

"I will show myself out, have a lovely afternoon Mrs. Granger," He turned to look at the witch, she had tipped her head slightly to watch him from beneath her lashes, "Miss Granger."

The hall to the door was short, the townhome far smaller than most he visited. By the time he pulled the door open, he heard the mother's scold echoing down the hall, "*Hermione Jean Granger! What did you do?*"

That evening, Hermione found herself in front of another townhome for yet another tedious ball.

Her mother had firmly insisted she attend, especially after the abrupt departure of the Duke. Harry and Lady Molly Weasley awaited her just outside the front door, having received her mother's owl requesting him to chaperone and assure she remained present for the entirety of the evening. It was likely Ronald and Ginny were in attendance as well, but had already disappeared inside.

Harry was clad in formal attire, his jacket a dark green to bring out the brilliant emerald of his eyes. Upon the bridge of his nose sat a narrow black domino, the mask simple yet trimmed in gold. The silly thing barely hid his identity to anyone who knew him; but perhaps that was

his intention. The Marquis was very much a rake, but he regarded her a friend and not a conquest; perhaps that was a good thing. His reputation was well known, just as it was with the others. And she could *see* the appeal of Harry; a dark haired Lord, brooding. A smile that could easily warm you. Hermione was immune to his charms and he rarely bent them on her.

While her mother remained supportive of Hermione's choice to further her education, she continued to be hopeful that her only child would find a well-to-do husband. To some extent, Mrs. Granger was aware of her daughter's habits of slinking off to avoid these events.

"Hermione," Harry greeted her warmly as she climbed up the stairs, extending his hand to her. "I'm thrilled to see you decided to attend this evening."

She dropped her hand into his with a huff, her words quiet and for his ears alone, "Oh, shove off. You know quite well I prefer to avoid events such as this."

He tucked her gloved hand into the crook of his elbow as he chuckled, "I have yet to understand why you wouldn't be thrilled to attend this very type of event, above all others. A masquerade ball? It screams anonymity. Isn't that your entire goal for this year?"

And all those prior.

They moved towards the front entrance as Hermione reached up to adjust the simple white mask upon her face; it was a half mask, trimmed in short white feathers and threaded with gold. Her dark sage gown was perhaps a touch more elaborate than she would usually indulge in, with large hoops that billowed out the cascading skirts about her that made her feel decidedly feminine. The bodice was cinched tight, the boning of the corset pressing into her ribs as her breasts were pushed upwards into what she was sure some thought was an appealing display. During the carriage ride here, Hermione had used her wand to add a delicate lace trim across exposed décolletage to wrap about her neck, because she was *not* about to be ogled like some prized mare at the races.

"Anonymity to me is not even attending these blasted events, Harry," Hermione reminded him as they slipped through the doors.

She felt Harry patting her fingers almost sympathetically, "Well you are stuck by my side for the evening, per your mother's edict."

Hermione rolled her eyes as they moved about the perimeter of the gorgeously decorated ballroom. The chandeliers were dimly lit for the evening, casting a romantic glow over the space. White flowers adorned every table, whilst their fallen petals were charmed to drift lazily from the ceiling. The air was heady with the scent of florals, bountiful delicacies piled upon one table and the heavy scent of Firewhiskey and other dangerous liquids to imbibe.

If she were another witch, in another time, perhaps the space would be charming to her. Secretly, she did find it beautiful. But alas, she didn't belong. She knew this entire evening was a clever trap, a beautiful design to snare couples together into marriage.

Many would fall victim to the siren call tonight, giving in to their temptations.

Alas, Hermione's only temptation was the library, which was hidden on the other end of the massive townhome and away from such frivolities.

As if sensing her thoughts, she felt Harry's hand gripping hers more firmly to stay her by his side. As if she had a choice. Without Ginny at his side, he would likely remain a constant companion. Which suited her in this instance, as Harry was still fairly recognizable as the Marquis and could prevent other undesirable suitors from approaching her.

Or keep a particular one at bay.

"Are you going to at least dance with me so I do not have to hover all evening?" Harry asked her as he snagged a pair of champagne glasses from a passing tray as it hovered before them.

She took the glass as he offered it to her, bringing it to her lips to savor the taste as she mulled over her answer, "Perhaps I'll allow one dance with you, Harry."

Her eyes roamed the bustling dance floor; a flurry of skirts, elaborate mens jackets and elaborate masks adorned with brilliant feathers and colors of all shades. It was like a moving painting, the brush strokes accompanying each sweeping motion of the dancers as they moved about the floor in sync. The music hummed through the vast space, the instruments played by an invisible hand.

Most of the attendees were still recognizable even behind their masks, merely taking advantage of the opportunity to openly be brazen, to flirt. To imbibe and indulge in fantasies that otherwise would allude them.

Hermione wondered if the Duke would be here. She assumed he would be, as a highly sought after *prize* he likely received all manner of invites.

But then again, what concern should it be to her?

Beyond the obvious, *glaring* fact that he wished to take her as his mistress. Heavens knows why, the few interactions they had endured so far had been far from pleasant. She hesitated; not unpleasant, truthfully. They had been mentally stimulating, driving a curiosity. One that she cared not to admit to.

Perhaps she was curious as to *why* the Duke would have offered such a thing to her.

Her, of all the available witches.

The only one who did not wish to be around him. She never fawned over him. Her lashes did not flutter. She did not get airs or need to be saved from herself.

Hermione wanted *nothing to do with* the Duke.

She had been keenly offended by his *offer*. Because that was what a proper young witch should be: upset, delicate sensibilities suitably offended.

Right?

She wished her own mind, clever as it was, would provide her with some answer, a reprieve from her questions. But there was no help from her thoughts.

“Harry,” Hermione sipped her wine as she turned towards her friend, “We’ve always been frank with one another.”

His eyebrows rose a notch. “Indeed we have. I’m assuming you have something on your mind you wish to discuss with me, something your own Mama cannot help with?”

She hesitated as she looked down into her glass, watching the bubbles forming along the sides. She felt hesitant but pushed onward, “Have you ever kept a mistress?”

Harry, who had been mid-drink, coughed violently on the champagne, breaking into loud, ungentlemanly hacks as he tried to clear his throat. He patted his chest as his green eyes darted to her face, cheeks colored red just beneath the bottom curve of his domino. He had gripped her arm, pulling her towards the wall and away from curious onlookers.

“That is not an appropriate line of questioning to be asking after,” His voice was barely above a hurried whisper as he glanced around them, “And for whatever reason could you possibly ask that?”

“It’s a simple yes or no question,” Hermione responded evasively as she batted his hand off her arm.

He was shaking his head as he turned to block her from the nearest group of people, “For anyone else— any *wizard*— that would be a simple answer, yes. But for you? No, most certainly not. Whatever are you asking for?”

She drummed the tips of her fingers against the stem of her glass as she looked up at her friend, his green eyes bright against the black of the mask. His face, from what she could see of it, was of one of concern.

“I’ve read about it somewhere and was curious about the nature of such an arrangement,” she replied simply.

“You are many things, but a great liar is not one,” His voice was barely audible, “your sweet Mama is going to have a heart attack if she hears about this. If you’ve indeed read about it in some *book*, I assure you that it is one you must get rid of immediately.”

Hermione let out an exasperated sigh, “Harry, I—“

“There is no argument you can make right now to make this acceptable. You are an unmarried young witch, you should not question such topics or read about them. Circe, just bringing it up would raise questions if someone were to overhear.”

“But—“

Harry shook his head firmly again, scowling down at her with all the power he thought he held as a Marquis, “No, Hermione. We will not discuss this topic any further this evening. *Especially* not in such a public setting.”

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek as she leaned back against the wall, looking up at him sullenly. She knew Harry meant well, that he was merely doing what he felt necessary. They were close, after all. Siblings brought together through friendship. But if she couldn't answer her questions with him, who could she turn to?

"Fine," She bit out in frustration, tipping her glass to her lips and finishing the rest of the champagne. She set the glass down on the side table as she glanced around Harry to scan the masked faces around them.

If Harry wouldn't help her, she would just find the source of her sudden influx of questions and misunderstandings—or lack of them. She just needed to locate the blond wizard amongst all the extravagance.

Which, it seemed, would be more difficult than she anticipated.

Hermione didn't necessarily *want* to confront the Duke about this sensitive topic, but rather she *needed* to. From the brief encounters with him, she had learned he wasn't reserved about his thoughts.

The music hummed as a new song began and Harry set down his glass, offering her his hand, "I promised your mother I would get you out for at least *one* turn about the floor. So if you would please sheath your daggers of disinterest..." He slanted a smirk at her as he wiggled his fingers.

She rolled her eyes and settled her hand into his palm, "Only because I adore you. If you were anyone else, I would—"

"Hex me? Hm, you are such a delight. It's such a wonder you have remained unattached all these years," Harry let out a laugh at her expense as he tugged her towards the couples lining up on the floor.

"Once again—I adore you," She patted her pocket where her wand was hidden in warning as she moved into the line beside the other women.

Harry pressed a finger to his lips as he released her hand, sweeping away to stand opposite her as the music queued everyone into place. Her stomach swooped as the first chords sounded and she knew she had to try to remember the steps of this particular dance. It was a fast paced waltz, the event itself allowing it to become far more risque than one would normally partake in. Each turn about the floor brought the partners together, only for them to step away and into another's arms.

Behind her own mask, Hermione was allowed to let herself *feel* the music, hidden away from curious and judging eyes. Harry was light on his feet, helping her through the steps with ease until he had to release her to her next partner. She had been lost in the moment until she felt his hand settle upon her lower back, glancing up at him in surprise at the bold touch. Her nerves tingled as their eyes met and she was falling into pools of molten steel.

"Your Grace," She breathed out, recognizing *him* immediately behind his mask.

It was a full face mask, the bulk of it black and gilded with gold. The curves of the mask were painted, echoing the shape of his face hidden below in a way that reminded her of the human skull itself— images she had seen drawn upon her father's journals. The only part of his face she could see were those eyes of his, keen and locked on hers. His blond hair was untamed today, as if he had run his fingers through it to muss its normally clean appearance.

"Miss Granger," His voice was low, caressing her name in such a tone that a shiver slid along her spine. He pulled her an imperceptible inch closer to him as he led her through the steps of the dance.

They parted for a brief moment and she met Harry again, the wizard spinning her in a tight circle before she was back in the Duke's arms. She knew it would only be a moment before the dance would spiral her away yet again.

"We need to talk," She whispered hurriedly as his fingers brushed low across her hip. He made no response as she moved away into another's arms, her gaze following him as he caught a petite witch's hand.

Blessedly they were drawing to the end of the dance, her toes aching from having been trod on a few times as she had bumbled her way through each step. The music was reaching the crescendo as she swept away from her current partner back into the Duke's arms and she let out a surprise gasp as he boldly drew her flush to his chest.

"Find me later," He said quietly just as he left her to Harry for the final turn.

Harry seemed unaware of her sudden interest in the Duke as he pulled her to a halt as the strings hummed their final chords. He smiled broadly at her, pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

"See, that wasn't so bad was it?" Harry asked as he drew her hand to his arm to lead her away from the dance floor.

No, it wasn't entirely unbearable. Her toes ached in her silly silken slippers, she was out of breath, but there had been a momentarily thrill to it all.

But only because it had helped her locate the Duke and she would be able to satisfy her curiosity before the night was out.

Chapter End Notes

****Don't worry, Hermione has questions for Draco that will answer your questions!****

The Masquerade

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Draco had been surprised to find Granger at the masquerade ball that evening. With how he had left her earlier that evening, he was sure she would have avoided this place like the black plague.

To say she had been irate would be an understatement. Her anger had made the bloody room tremble as her magic reacted to her emotions.

He had not seen her enter as he himself had been in one of the drawing rooms with Theo and Blaise. Of course, the Earl had been all too eager to hear about the wage he had pitched against the Viscount. The two were terrible gamblers and everything was fair game to them. As far as they were aware, Theo was the more pleasant out of their group and Blaise had chimed in to say that Draco didn't stand against the Viscount by that aspect alone.

Little did either wizards know he had cast his dice, praying he wouldn't get snake eyes.

But the dice were still tumbling and he was eager to see how they would land.

So when he had found himself on the dance floor with Miss Pansy Parkinson, it had been an added bonus to turn and find none other than the witch in question in his arms. And at a glance, he never would have been able to spot her amongst all the other ladies. She had been swathed in layers of silk, her gown befitting to the high standards forced upon her by their society. And even though she had gone above and beyond to make sure she was still covered, there had been a tantalizing hint of the swell of her breasts through the lace collar of her bodice.

The mask he had chosen to wear had been one that had been in his family for some time; a mask, etched in black and gold with an intricately painted skeleton face upon it. It hid his face entirely, and despite the fact he had platinum hair, many seemed unable to recognize him.

But *she* did.

Draco could tell the moment his identity clicked in her mind.

The dance had drawn to a close and he had spied the witch leaving the floor on the arm of another man, their heads bent together as they spoke. He felt a pang of something akin to jealousy— why he couldn't fathom— to see her so agreeable with another wizard.

Miss Granger was anything *but agreeable*.

He tried to follow her but he was immediately thwarted by a young witch— he spared her a glance— Daphne Greengrass. Her mask barely covered her face and she was quite

recognizable with her aristocratic features. She came from one of the oldest and most respected families in the wizarding world, both she and her younger sister Astoria were suitable prospects for Draco to marry. He had considered them of course, his parents had pushed for a betrothal with one of the sisters. But Draco had waited, unwilling to marry right out of his boot straps. He had wanted to travel abroad for a year and enjoy his life without the complications of a wife and children.

With the death of his father, he had been forced to return home to assume the duties that fell to him with his new title as Duke of Wiltshire.

His years of nobility upbringing and high expectations kicked into gear as he looked at Daphne, politely listening to her rambling off about her latest crochet or whatever-the-hell it was that ladies did during their free time.

Merlin's beard, it all sounded so bloody boring.

As the witch reached a pause in her conversation, Draco decided to finally chime in with the most mundane – yet what she would want to hear– words, “You look lovely this evening. That dress is very becoming on you. The color... Compliments your eyes.”

And with a simple compliment, she was waving a ridiculous fan as her neck flushed slightly.

Witches, Draco scoffed.

Far too easy to get in a tizzy. Especially when they knew who he was and were practically begging for his attention.

The break gave him enough time to excuse himself from her side to slip through the throng of people as they meandered about. Draco could recognize a handful of the other attendees; the ones who were bold enough to advertise their availability, those seeking a match and those just here to enjoy themselves. It was a sea of silks and expensive fabrics, a palette of colors all blended together from an artist's brush. The hum of music was just loud enough to force people to stand fractionally closer than was normally accepted, doing exactly as it was intended and driving couples into near-rule breaking situations.

Masquerades were a dance with the devil in this society, and one small step could bring a moment of delight or a lifetime of misery.

Or the other way around, depending upon how you viewed the situation.

Draco maneuvered his way easily through the throng, batting away a wayward candle as it drifted low over his head. He was just tall enough to look over most of the witches' heads, scanning the crowd for that one particular woman he sought. She had sought him out, her eyes had been full of questions; a miniscule victory for him.

Having done a round, neatly dodging Lady Parkinson and Pansy, Draco decided that she had indeed made an exit from the ballroom. Likely retreating to the library, as seemed to be her go-to escape. He followed suit, dipping off into one of the hallways and away from the festivities to seek out his quarry. As it seemed to be with most townhomes in London, the

primary library was on the main floor and relatively near the foyer. While the door was only yards away from the grand entrance to the ballroom, it was significantly more quiet here. To the point where he could hear his dragonhide shoes clicking against the floor with each step.

The door to the library was ajar and Draco nudged it open with his shoulder. He eased himself through the narrow opening, quietly shutting it behind him as he glanced around the lowly lit room. Unlike the Parkinson's ball, it seemed as if each of the rooms had candles and chandeliers aglow. Each cast a warm ambience through the space.

An *inviting* one.

The library here was of a decent size, a semi vast chamber with walls lined with towering shelves and a smattering of inviting elegantly carved furniture throughout the center of the room. His eyes scanned each of the chairs, only to find them empty. Draco moved further into the room, his attention moving outwards to follow the shelves. Finding her in one of the further corners, her wand shoved into her curls in that ridiculous fashion as she shuffled along the shelf. He could tell she had yet to notice his appearance as she remained focused on the books before her, her fingers lightly tracing the spines as she read the titles.

As he neared, she stiffened slightly as she finally noticed she was no longer alone and turned towards him. Her mask had long since been removed and was likely abandoned on one of the many little tables that scattered the room. He reached up, pulling his own mask from his face as he drew closer to her.

"You Grace," She said warily, reaching up to pluck her wand free from her hair.

"Miss Granger," Draco stopped a few feet from her, "You said you wished to discuss some things with me. So here I am. Let's not waste anyone's time with dancing about the subject at hand."

Granger narrowed her eyes slightly on him, the tip of her wand de-illuminating as she tucked it into the hidden pocket of her skirts.

Blimey, did she alter all her gowns? Draco found himself musing over this until she spoke.

"Yes. Of course," She drew in a breath as she fidgeted with the laces of her bodice, her eyes still fixed on his face. "I was fairly upset earlier over your crude offer, My Lord—"

He took the opportunity to inch forward, "And you are no longer upset?"

Her arms crossed over her stomach as she lifted her chin, "Don't be a fool. I never implied I was no longer irate. I still am tempted to hex your codpiece right off your—" Draco instinctively shifted his hand to cover himself defensively, "—Never mind. It doesn't matter anymore. What does matter is the finer details of your offer."

Draco stalled his approach as he looked at her; the way she stood indicated she was standoffish yet. Unsure, but unwilling to relent. Her eyes blazed in the low light with a curiosity that she had yet to understand.

“I thought I laid out the details fairly plainly for you,” He quipped, “Do I need to dumb them down?”

Granger’s eyes narrowed further on his face and he swore he heard the little tap of her slipped foot from beneath the hem of her gown. He bit the inside of his cheek as he cleared his throat, “What I mean is, would you like me to elaborate on what I explained?”

“Obviously that is what I wish for you to do, Your Grace,” She bit out.

“You can call me Draco,” He couldn’t help himself.

She didn’t even hesitate with her response, “Your Grace works just fine.”

“Malfoy?”

“Absolutely not.”

“So no familiarity yet? May I call you Hermione?”

Her scathing look was response enough to his inquiry as her hand had ventured towards her pocket in warning, “You must have a death wish? I didn’t summon you here—”

He scoffed loudly, “You didn’t summon me at all as I came *willingly*.”

Granger spoke over him as she dropped her hand back into her pocket, her brows rising very slightly, “—To talk about formalities thrust upon us by society and the implications of *not* following said rules and standards. No thank you. Let us proceed with what I wished to discuss.”

“We can circle back to the names bit,” She was shaking her head even as he spoke, “But go ahead with the first of what will be a million questions.”

She started to stride past him with a disgruntled sound, “Maybe this was a mistake.”

“One you won’t regret. Stay.”

“I am not someone you can make demands on. I don’t care about your bloody *station*.”

“I’m not asking you to stay because I am your superior—” If looks could kill, he would be dead faster than the *Avada*, so he quickly changed his tactic as she visibly started to bristle at his words. Draco held a hand out as he retreated a small step, “I am requesting it so you may finally ask and receive the answers your mind hungers for.”

With those words, she finally paused her escape. She was just at his side now, staring straight ahead with that frustrated look on her face. She was waging a mental war with herself; acquiesce her desire for knowledge and stay, or give in to her irritation and flounce away.

When she didn’t continue past him, he spoke again in recognition that her curiosity had won out this time, “My *offer* to you was not made as an insult or slight on your character, Miss

Granger.” Her eyes flicked up to meet his, “But as I mentioned, an opportunity that may benefit us both. *Will* benefit us both and fulfill both of our... desires.”

Granger was silent for a moment as she studied him, her expression clearing and becoming unreadable as she considered his words.

“Tell me what it is you desire then, My Lord?” Her voice was barely above a whisper and her boldness caught him off guard.

Draco slowly walked around behind her, close enough that her skirts rustled against his legs but far enough that the only thing that he felt was the heat from her body. Pausing behind her, he leaned forward towards her ear, “What do I desire, you ask? The answer is obvious, isn’t it? You don’t remind me of a fool...”

She remained glued to the spot, her head tipping slightly to watch him over her shoulder. Like a trapped rabbit might watch a wolf; except she still had the opportunity to bolt. He wouldn’t make the mistake of cornering Granger, for he had the feeling she would not hesitate to take him down. What he knew of her indicated she had only shown a fraction of her abilities.

“Why me? Out of every other witch out there—” She motioned with her chin towards the door, “Why choose *me*?”

He ached to reach up and sweep away a wayward curl as it teased the nape of her neck, the hair trembling with each exhalation from Draco.

Not yet, he warned himself. She wouldn’t accept a touch from him just yet.

“Because you are everything they are not,” Draco said quietly as he let himself continue around from behind her, needing to escape that dangerous draw to touch her, “Witty. Smart. Independent.” He drew to a halt in front of her, folding his arms behind his back as he straightened, “You aren’t looking for an attachment. You are in search of your freedom, which you struggle to have on your own.”

He knew his final words would be a jab despite the others being a complement. But she knew he was right, just as much as he did. Financially, being a spinster was near impossible for the average witch. Her family was of decent standing, yet they would likely be unable to support her through her entire life without an additional source of income. Which, her being a woman, was unlikely to happen any time soon. Undoubtedly, the only positions Miss Granger would accept would be one of the male variety and she would be spurned and humiliated.

Granger lifted her chin slightly as she looked up at him, “Pray tell, how is it that *you* can offer me my freedom? Isn’t a mistress a form of paid servitude of the lowest form? I am to bend over at every beck and call?”

He wanted to laugh at her innocence; the way her cheeks flushed even as she spoke with such vehemence indicated she had no real idea of what such a position would entail. Nor about the act itself.

“Tell me, what it is you know about sex?”

Her cheeks blazed red now, but she determinedly held his gaze, “That a male mounts the female—” He was shaking his head and she spoke louder, “Inserts his... *penis* and she becomes pregnant.”

“Granger,” Draco kept a straight face at her clinical terms as he moved forward into her space ever so slightly, “That is what animals do. That is not sex, that is mating. I am not looking to *breed*. I am looking for someone to indulge in, to tease, to *touch*, to bring to a climax.” With each word, he had allowed himself to lean towards her until their chests were almost touching. He could hear the slight hitch in her breath as her hands fisted into her skirts, her chest rising and falling as a primal instinct took over.

With a single fingertip, he slid it along her arm from her wrist to her elbow, a ghost of a caress. Her lashes fluttered briefly at the touch, her lips parting as she drew her arm against her side.

“How does what you want benefit me?” She asked in a quiet voice, her eyes returning to his as his fingers left her arm. “You want me to give myself to you, in a way that I never wished to give to a man. You ask for so much.”

“Oh, this won’t be just for me,” His lips curled into a smirk and he was aching to continue, but he decided it best to keep the thought of her writhing beneath his body as she came to himself. “But I can give you everything you need. What you desire. I already told you this. You will have your own home, you will have your own money to spend, there will be no more obligations to come to these events. You are free to do as you wish— as long as you only come for me.”

Granger tipped her head as her cheeks turned a brighter shade of red; she had caught on that he was implying more than he meant. He was aware that she had read that book he had given her.

“What happens when you marry? You eventually will be expected to take a wife.”

“Should that situation arise, I will make sure you are well taken care of. You will be set with a dowry to use as you see fit— find a husband or go about your own way.”

Her voice was quiet as she continued to ponder her thoughts, “My reputation will be in tatters. What chance would I have after I’ve been ruined?”

“I assure you, no one will consider you *ruined* by becoming my mistress. In fact, by being associated with me you will become more desirable,” Which was more or less true. Draco had mistresses before and when he tired of them, they were immediately accosted by another Lord. Perhaps in hopes to garner some sort of friendship with *him*, he didn’t know. “If that is what you wish, of course. If you plan to remain a spinster... Alas, your reputation won’t matter, will it? You will be set for the remainder of your days to do with as you see fit. I can even provide you with a home in the country, or send you abroad.”

Granger slanted a look at him as she hesitated, “What about pregnancy? You claim that this act between two people is not for *mating*, but the outcome is still the same.”

“There are charms for that, Granger.”

“If those fail?”

“As I’ve stated, you will be provided for and cared for as if you were my wife. Without the obligations of a wife.”

“And the child?”

“You are speaking of eventualities that are unlikely to occur, now.”

“*And if there is a child, Your Grace?*” She was persistent as she held his gaze.

They both knew what a child out of wedlock meant; there were only two acceptable options. A rushed marriage, or an illegitimate bastard.

“I will do what is in my power to provide for any offspring as well.”

Granger fell silent as she suddenly moved away from him, her hands twisting before her. He waited where she had left him, letting her mull over her thoughts and their conversation. She paced for a moment along the shelves, her eyes wandering along the titles but he knew she wasn't really reading them.

“If I agree to this arrangement, it will be kept between us,” She said quietly as she looked over to him.

“Won’t your absence be noted?” He pointed out.

Despite the fact that she seemed to be one to slip from the parties early in the evening, she made an appearance nonetheless. Even a wallflower is noticed by a few. And those few will notice if she was no longer hovering in the shadows.

“*Circe*, you’re right,” She muttered in frustration. She pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose, “Then how is this to work? If I suddenly disappear completely it will most certainly raise questions. And people always find their answers.”

“How about we pretend to be betrothed?” Draco lifted his shoulders in a shrug and she immediately stopped her pacing to turn to him.

Her hands dropped away from her face as she leveled a stern look on him, “Excuse me? That is the last thing I wish to *be with you*. You’re insufferable.”

No, you’re insufferable, is what he wished to say.

Instead, he scoffed as he crossed the room towards her, “So first I have to address the fact that you are willing to become my mistress, but being my pseudo-fiance is where you draw the line?”

She lifted her chin as her brows rose, “I would rather continue to ignore you in public than pretend to have any affection towards you, yes.”

“Granger. Your logic is severely flawed,” Draco chuckled as he stopped in front of her yet again. He restrained himself from reaching out to her, “We will be *intimate*—”

She adroitly chimed in, “In the privacy of the home you promised me, yes.”

He shook his head as he closed in on her, his shoes disappearing beneath the hem of her gown as the inches grew less, “And somehow you cannot continue that familiarity for the greedy eyes of the ton?”

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug as she smiled up at him sweetly. The smile, he quickly realized, was false, “I would prefer to continue to *ignore* you in public, as I stated already.”

Bloody hell, how was he supposed to handle her in the privacy of her own home? On top of that, was he aroused by this? He certainly felt his pulse racing, blood rushing through his ears as he focused on her.

“You are quite cold, Miss Granger.”

She continued, her smile never faltering, “Obviously you must find it charming or some nonsense, or else you wouldn’t be standing in front of me?”

This conversation was going nowhere in the direction he wished it to. He grabbed the reins and turned it back on track; it was his turn to point out the obvious, “You wish to keep all the suitors at bay, without raising suspicion, correct?”

Her head dipped, her voice clipped. Mildly annoyed, even. As if the answer were obvious; “Yes.”

Draco continued, nudging her mind into the path he wanted it to take with reasoning, “And I wish to keep the desperate debutantes and their eager mamas away.”

“So you’ve said,” Granger was slightly subdued at this point as she considered him.

He folded his hands in front of him, flashing her one of his winning smiles. She seemed less than amused by his attempt so he continued on regardless, “Alas, the final piece of our arrangement must be a false engagement. In one swoop, we will not only be able to relax the rest of the season without being hounded, but we will both find comfort in the knowledge we are getting something we both desire; our freedom.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should start adding some artwork to go along with this. 🧐

The Arrangement

“So how do we go about this faux-arrangement, Your Grace?” Hermione asked the Duke as they left the library together. He slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow a moment before he reached up to slide his mask back into place. A sticking charm in place, the mask clung without strings or laces.

She hated to admit, but some of what he said had rung true. To an extent, it made logical sense. If she were to just move into a townhome, it would raise suspicion. If he were to suddenly disappear, he would likely garnish unwanted attention. She could fade away, back into the wallpaper she so desperately clung to, and he could retire to his preferred lifestyle of—whatever it was the Duke did.

“Easy,” He leaned towards her, his gloved fingers closing over hers and she ignored the way her pulse leapt at the glancing touch, “We do exactly as we are now.”

She reached up to adjust the mask on her face, “This hardly will raise many eyebrows. Many couples will be walking about in such a manner.”

The Duke continued, unperturbed, “You seem to forget that you are with me—”

“A pompous ass? Oh, I am aware of your arrogance.”

He rolled his eyes as he led her down the hall and through the foyer towards the ballroom, “No, that is not what I meant and you know it. I mean to say that I am recognizable wherever I go.”

“So humble,” She muttered beneath her breath as she considered her sanity for thinking this was an ideal plan.

Was it too late to back out?

The wizard was outspoken, bold. Tantalizingly intelligent and quick witted. *No*, not tantalizing. Annoying. He vexed her. Was it too late to hex him? Would he notice if she changed the color of his cravat? She covertly glanced at the lace bunched at his throat. Perhaps a lovely shade of pink would knock him down a few pegs. Then again... Her eyes slipped to his face. He probably wouldn't even care.

Prat.

“Miss Granger, you wound me,” He scolded her quietly as his long, satin wrapped fingers stroked over hers, sending a wave of goosebumps along her arm and she ignored that odd and foreign sensation that curled through her.

She let out a quiet laugh as she glanced at him from beneath her mask, “I doubt that's possible, Your Grace. Your ego is so large I doubt even a spell could deflate it.”

Before she could even react, he was physically pushing her to the side and into an alcove, the heavy curtains falling shut behind him. He crowded her against the wall and her breath caught as she looked up at him. He had shoved his mask up roughly, scowling down at her as he braced a hand on the wall besides her head.

“Granger. The comment I wish to make would have you blushing down to your silly little slippers,” He reached down and flicked her mask up with a finger.

She batted his hand away as she tried to grab her mask, “I don’t *even know*—”

The Duke caught her hand easily, his fingers gentle as they pressed against her racing pulse. His thumb slipped along the inside of her wrist, sending a shiver through her. His voice was low as he looked down at her, his eyes like molten steel, “It means you need to read that book I gave you. While I find your innocence adorable, it won’t last long with me.”

Hermione hadn’t noticed how quickly the distance had closed between their bodies. Her mind had been too caught up in his words, about the book she knew he was referring to. He was far closer than he had ever been, the heat radiating off him wrapping around her. And he was *touching* her; her nerves were leaping in some unknown anticipation. The faint scent of crisp apples teased her nose as she looked up at him, trying to understand the way her muscles of her body seemed to become coiled with this tension. She knew what a kiss was, she *had* been kissed before, after all.

But he was so close, in her space.

“Are you going to kiss me?” She blurted out in a hush, her mouth running faster than her mind.

He stilled, amusement crossing his face as he continued to caress her wrist and send little flutters through her body. Lips curving into a smirk, he was leaning more into her space as their breath mingled. A heated weight dropped low in her stomach as her eyes dropped to his lips. It was the first time she didn’t want to wipe it off his face. Not with her hand, anyway.

His voice was nothing more than the barest of whispers, “Do you want me to?”

Yes.

“No,” She replied far too quickly, shocked at the immediate response from her traitorous mind.

Like a cat with warm milk, his smirk only grew. His hand released her wrist to curl his fingers beneath her chin, the touch sending warmth spreading through her as he tipped her face towards his.

Oh, Circe.

“If you’re to be mine, I’d like to think we would... kiss a lot. Does that make you uncomfortable?” The Duke’s tone was light, but no longer teasing as his thumb swept across her bottom lip.

A thrill went through her body as she felt him pressing the pad of his thumb against the swell of her lip. Hermione couldn't understand the rush of emotions at such a simple yet... delightful touch. Her voice chose this precise moment to fail her as she shook her head mutely. She had agreed to this arrangement, after all. She couldn't identify the look that crossed his face—it almost seemed possessive but she couldn't quite pin it as such—as his thumb slipped away, his own lips just a breath from hers.

He turned his face at the last moment, his lips barely ghosting along the rise of her cheekbone until they were beside her ear. He whispered, his voice laced with amusement, “I think I should confiscate your wand in the future, Miss Granger.”

Hermione released the breath she hadn't realized she had been holding, noticing that her free hand had seemed to have a mind of its own and dug her wand from her pocket. And the tip of that very wand was pressed against the Duke's stomach. Her face flushing brightly as he chuckled in her ear.

“Oh! I'm sorry,” she looked down at her fingers that curled around the wand, “I didn't even realize... I'm quite particular about my space.”

“I can see this,” He rested the tip of his finger against her knuckles and pushed the wand away from where it dug into his ribs, “Alas, I admire your dedication to keeping your personal bubble from all your suitors.”

She felt her brow twitch as she looked up at him, “Oh yes, I have them lining up around the block at my *quaint* home.”

The Duke rolled his eyes, “Yes, a poor choice of words. I apologize, Granger.”

“A bit. And unfortunately, you are my only... Well, not a suitor,” She let her head fall back against the wall, “But the only wizard to have noticed me in years. I was quite content to mill about at my own pace until you forced your way into my life.”

“One you will not regret, I *assure* you,” His lips had curled into that cheshire grin again and it was her turn to roll her eyes as she tapped the edge of her wand. The silk cravat at his throat turned a brilliant shade of magenta.

Much better.

“I wish to retire for the evening, what must we do in order to have the ton thinking one of the eligible bachelors is to be removed from the market?”

Hermione was barely hiding her mirth at the sight of the pompous ass with his freshly colored cravat. She was actively trying to ignore the heat from his body, pressed so close to hers. Still not touching her, just a breath away. She couldn't quite figure out the sensation that rolled through her body; it was, if she were being honest, quite delightful.

He was quiet for a moment as he leaned back from her, his hand braced against the wall besides her head; “Tonight I will walk you to your carriage. Perhaps—“ the hand that had pushed away the wand slid up to trace his fingertips against the back of her hand as his voice

became a murmur, “a lingering kiss to your hand.” A delightful thrill ran through her body at the touch. He continued, his voice returning to the normal baritone, “Tomorrow I will call on you.”

The promise of this sent a shiver through her. Normally, *normally*, she despised callers. She hated the interruption to her quiet and complacent days to spend languishing in the knowledge between the pages of her books. The adventures that awaited her there; traveling abroad to other worlds.

Yet his words enticed her to look at the pages of her own novel.

“Yes,” Hermione said quietly as the pads of his fingers continued their mesmerizing caress.

If she was breathless over such an innocent touch, how was she going to handle... Those *things* she had seen in the book he had given her? Is that what he intended to do with her?

~*~

The following morning after breakfast, Draco called on Granger for tea. Not that he cared about such things, but it was the appropriate gesture for a gentleman showing his interest in courting a lady.

Except it was a ruse.

He had no intention of courting the sharp-tongued Miss Granger. He wanted to finalize their arrangement. He was eager to—he couldn’t say *ruin* her, that was incorrect. If done correctly, her reputation would remain unmarred. No, Draco was excited to claim her, to bend her to his will. She was so headstrong, the thought of coaxing something other than barbed words from her mouth sent a thrill through him.

She was witty, intelligent, and if she were a man, she would be his equal.

Draco *did* view her as an equal.

Perhaps that was why he wished to do more than just bed her. As his mistress, he could keep her for himself. He could give her what she craved.

Hardly selfish.

She was unwanted and unnoticed by the rest of the bloody idiots. It was their loss for missing out on such a fiery lass.

Mrs. Granger led him towards the study once again, excitedly animated about having a Duke in her home for the second time. Gushing on about silly things, how she felt honored for his presence and how fortunate her daughter was that he would deign to find something suitable in her to court.

If only she knew their true intentions.

Draco was left standing outside the study door as the matron scurried away to fetch their tea. The door was ajar and he peered through the crack. She was seated on the chaise lounge just as she had been last time. Undisturbed, she looked so at ease with a book open and resting against the flat of her hand. No furrowed brows in frustration, no flashing eyes as her ire rose to the surface. Not that he minded those bold expressions, but this felt like a treat. Something rarely anyone else witnessed.

He eased the door open further, taking in her appearance in entirety. How had he never noticed the witch before? She wasn't homely in the slightest. Surely they had crossed paths before this point. It baffled his mind. She had successfully become a wallflower in every sense of the word; slipping beneath every single wizard's radar.

Today she wore no grand attire; on any other witch he would consider her dress lacking. Her gown was simple, a soft periwinkle hue with lace neckline that covered the swell of her breasts. While he had always assumed he preferred that peek at the cleavage, suddenly Draco found he enjoyed this just as much, if not more.

Modest.

That's the word he would associate with Miss Granger.

Not the humble kind, but she was *subtle*.

Like the hardy coreopsis flower, overshadowed by the heavy rose bushes. Overlooked, but content to bloom on her own. Surviving against everything thrown at it with minimal requirements to grow. She looked up as he entered the room, her simple plaited mahogany hair catching the light from the window behind her and creating a soft halo about her head.

"Your Grace," her response seemed automatic as she closed the book, one finger still tucked between the pages to hold her place. He realized it might take her some time to become comfortable calling him by his name.

"Miss Granger," Draco replied as he crossed the room towards her. He leaned his cane against the side table as he gestured to the seat beside her, "May I join you?"

Sitting directly beside her, *sharing* the chaise with her, was bold. But they were past that point. Besides, he had left the door open, as was required while they remained unmarried.

She adjusted to make room for him as she tipped her head, "Very well."

Draco settled down onto the cushions besides her, their knees bumping together as it sank beneath his weight. She cleared her throat but didn't move away for once, her fingers clenching briefly against the spine of her book as she glanced down at their legs. Her thigh was warm through the layers of her skirts as it pressed against his.

"So I feel we should discuss the finer details of our arrangement," Draco said quietly, casting a glance to the open door to reaffirm their continued privacy.

“Yes, let’s. We’ve already covered the basics. I would like to know more. For starters— my living arrangements.” She smoothed her skirts with one hand before setting the book on her knees, lifting her eyes to meet his.

Circe, she was direct.

Most mistresses in search of a new consort already had some sort of living situation of their own— many times one that was provided to them by their prior lover— took their time gathering their things to make that transition.

That being said, Granger was *not* a typical mistress. In fact, Draco was sure if he referred to her as such— whether or not it was a part of their arrangement— she would hex him.

“I have a townhome about two blocks away that should suit you. If you’d like, we can go tour it today. You are free to do as you wish; redecorate, rearrange, whatever makes you comfortable.”

She was quiet for a moment as she studied his face, “So I will not be at *your* townhome, or palatial manor but a separate building entirely? Alone?”

Draco cleared his throat under her steady gaze; her tone was even, her expression giving nothing away. But he understood her meaning, the subtle jab. “The building you will reside in is essentially yours, all but in name. I cannot legally give it to you unless we wed, which we do not plan to. As I stated, it is *yours* as long as we continue this arrangement.”

Her head dipped slightly as she fell into thought, “And what are my requirements beyond... Having relations with you?” There was a faint blush across her cheeks now as she spoke but her words were steady, unwavering.

“I will not force any other interactions upon you that you do not wish to participate in,” Draco replied slowly, reaching a hand out to cover hers where they rested in her lap. She swallowed at the contact but didn’t retreat as he assumed she would, “But if we are to continue this false engagement, I would think it beneficial we make several appearances together in public. We could promenade—” She visibly cringed, “Or go to another soiree—” Granger let out a barely contained groan and he had to bite back a grin at her displeasure, “Or we could go to the Opera.”

Her quiet complaints fell silent as she momentarily gripped his hand, “I’ve never been to the Opera.”

Draco decided to use that to his advantage as he turned his body more to face her, “Excellent. I have a private box, very discreet but yet enough to give the ton a tantalizing glimpse of us. We of course will need a chaperone; your mother, perhaps?”

A gasp echoed from the doorway and Draco turned to look at Mrs.Granger, who was standing there with a wide smile across her face as she clutched the handles of the tray, “Your Grace, I would be delighted to attend the Opera with you and my daughter.”

Granger had slumped back into the cushions beside him, letting out an audible groan as she looked up at the ceiling, “Mother, please. He was not inviting you, we were merely *discussing*—”

“Dear heavens, you are right. How presumptuous of me—“ Mrs. Granger flushed as she set down the tray on the low table beside them, “I apologize, Your Grace. I never meant to— that is to say I— the way my daughter was speaking about you—“ Draco turned to look at Granger who had sat bolt upright, her cheeks turning pink, “I just assumed you two were indeed entering into the first steps of courtship.”

“You are absolutely correct, Mrs. Granger,” Draco replied lightly, gripping Granger’s hand in his. He even went as far as to slip his fingers between hers, ignoring the glance from her as he continued soothingly, “I have come here today to express my honorable—“ there was a muffled snort from beside him, “—intentions with your daughter.”

Mrs. Granger was fluttering her hands in excitement, beaming at the pair of them, “I must tell Papa. Hermione, Your Grace—“ before Granger could stop her, her mother was dashing from the room.

Granger turned to look at him, jerking her hand away as she scoffed, “How could you lie to her face like that? *Honorable intentions*? Fiddle on a broomstick, Malfoy!” She rose to her feet in a rustle of skirts, dropping the book into his lap as she paced away from him. “I fully intended to tell my Mama about *my* intentions to become your mistress.”

Draco was gaping at her.

He realized how ridiculous his dumbfounded expression must be and he swiftly tossed the book onto the chaise as he joined her. She had propped her hands on her waist, her brows furrowed in frustration as she tipped her head back to look at him.

“Why would you ever tell your parents that you wish to become a mistress? You do understand that most parents do not wish such a thing on their child. She clearly wishes to see you *married* to a Duke, not just sleeping in his bed!”

Her fingers drummed along her sides, “Most parents, you are correct. *My parents*, however, have been supportive of me from the moment I first exhibited magical abilities. When I decided to read instead of learning embroidery. When I rode a horse the way a man does instead of side-saddle. My parents deserve to know what their daughter is planning to do.”

The distance had closed between them during her impassioned words, his hands coming out to catch her elbows as he dragged her flush to his chest. He lowered his face towards hers, their lips just a breath apart, “Hermione, when I take you as my mistress, I am going to ruin you.”

His words should have scared Hermione, they should have been a warning. A red flag, waving high in the air. While she *thought* she knew what she was in for, the expectations for what lie ahead of her, she had no real idea.

How could she?

Hermione Granger knew a lot of things, but she had no knowledge of what she had agreed to. Beyond the book he had given her, she was sorely lacking in knowledge and she hated it.

She ached to learn, to discover what the women in that book experienced. To *become* a woman.

Malfoy's hands were warm as they gripped her elbows and she felt small in his hold. She was crushed to his chest, despite the fact that his fingers only lightly held her in place. Her lungs suddenly seemed to forget how to function, her breathing becoming ragged as she looked up at the wizard before her. He was tall, perhaps taller than she remembered or maybe she was sinking against him. Sinking *into* him, the warmth of his lean body coaxing her closer. Her heart was racing and she wondered if he could hear the thundering against her ribs.

There would be only a second for her to back out of this, to continue her life as she had originally planned.

Alone.

But there was a need burning through her as his breath fanned across her face. Her hands were splayed across his chest— not quite pushing him away but not fully accepting him yet.

The tension between them alarmed her; as it should, her rational mind told her.

A proper young lady would put as much distance between her and the Duke.

But there was a primal part of her that was clawing its way free, urging her onward. Her fingers twisted into the lapel of his jacket as she lifted her chin, their lips almost touching now.

Hermione felt something she had never felt before; she felt like a wanton.

They were only a breath apart. Her eyes lifted to his; they were two pools of molten steel. Her voice was barely above a whisper as the words fell unbidden from her lips, "Then ruin me, Your Grace."

At the Opera

Charming Readers;

*A new show has come to London
and it seems it has drawn out even the most
reclusive of members.*

Do my eyes deceive me?

*The Duke Wiltshire was seen with
another eligible bachelor, the Viscount no less,
in his private box.*

Whatever could the pair of rakes be discussing?

*Perhaps the Duke's sudden interest
in one particular wallflower?*

*Your Ever Watchful Writer;
Lady Quibbler*

The words tumbled from Hermione's lips, spoken almost of their own free will. They caught her off guard, how eagerly they had sprung free. She had been kissed before. A chaste, simple touch of the lips. It had been... *Disappointing* , to say the least. She hadn't realized it at the time, but it felt like *nothing*.

She had felt *nothing* .

But now her body was humming in some unknown anticipation.

The tension was thick, palpable. Not to mention the Duke was looking at her with a mix of disbelief and what she could only atone to excitement. *Desire* . It burned through her, too. She recognized it for what it was; it was a primal knowledge. Ingrained into her very being. Her fingers twisted ever so slightly into the fabric of his jacket as his grip changed from a light pressure on her elbows to gripping her upper arms. He was barely restraining himself, the muscle beneath her fingertips shifting.

“This is your last chance to tell me no,” The Duke whispered, his voice a low timbre that reverberated through her chest. His lips were so close she could feel a tingling sensation along hers as he spoke, the proximity causing all the hairs along her arms to stand.

Her lashes fell as she kept herself still, forcing any lingering doubts from her mind as she took a steadying breath, “This is my only invitation for you to take what you want.”

And she meant it.

Something akin to a growl tore from his throat as he pulled her body completely flush to his, his lips falling to cover hers. His kiss was bruising; she hadn’t expected him to treat her like some delicate flower. To give her that sweet first kiss. But she had not been prepared for *this*.

A thrill shot through her body at the feel of his hands sweeping from her arms to mold along her back and hips, his lips slanting across hers. They were soft and pliant against hers, yet demanding. There was no way in which he was asking her for a quarter now, he was just *taking*. She had given him the permission and he would not miss it. He stole her breath, the intensity of him engulfing her and ensnaring her senses.

She had not taken into account that she could *taste* him as his tongue traced her lips. Firewhiskey teased her taste buds as he angled her body into his. Her heart was pounding in her chest as her fingers tightened into his jacket, both pulling him closer as she pushed herself up onto her toes to meet his kiss.

Heat exploded along her body as his hands traced the curve of her back, his hands firm and gentle, and she felt the tips of his fingers dipping against her hips.

And as quickly as he claimed her lips, he tore them away with a strangled rumble deep in his throat.

The Duke was looking down at her through hooded eyes, his lips wet from hers. She wondered if her lips looked like his; swollen, glistening. He looked hungry, ready to devour her and she was at his mercy.

Yet somehow she knew that she held control over the moment.

A blessing or a curse in this situation where she knew nothing, Hermione didn’t know.

But inside her echoed a thirst for *more*. To keep going, to experience what her body was demanding. What her lips wanted. To be crushed against his, to taste him again.

His voice was husky, wavering ever so slightly, and pressed to his chest as she was, she could feel it reverberating through her body; “Does this mean you are interested in accepting my offer?”

Hermione was trying to process her thoughts, jumbled the rush of primal sensations that was currently making her brain into nothing more than a fog.

And *Circe*, his bold offer did sound promising.

If this was a taste of it, she wanted more.

At her lack of a response, his hold on her loosened further- as if to give her the opportunity to bolt if she wished. But did she want to run? Her pulse still leapt erratically. Her lips ached to be beneath his once more. Heat pooled somewhere deep inside her. A fire.

“Join me to the opera. Tomorrow night,” the Duke was looking down at her as he eased her back down onto her feet, his hands sliding to grip her waist for a moment before he released her entirely from his hold. “Let me show you what it means to be *my* Mistress.”

~*~

It was late afternoon when Draco arrived at the Opera house. The show itself wouldn't start for another hour, true, but that was not the real intention for the opera. It held the same purpose as the promenade and a soiree; to make an appearance, to woo, to charm, social climbing matrons to scheme and ultimately, it was an opportunity to show off your place in society in hopes of making alliances.

Or rather, that was the usual intent of the opera.

For Draco, his intentions had shifted from amusing himself with multiple partners to winning over *just one* . A potential Mistress. Miss Hermione Granger's interest had been piqued. Snared, like the wily witch she was, her mind demanded she seek the answers to questions he had raised.

But she was only *just* interested.

She could turn and run at the wrong turn of phrase.

Walking to his private box seats, he pulled the cords and let the heavy velvet curtain fall shut behind him. The box was charmed and no one could enter without him allowing access, an honor he gave to few. Draco only attended the Opera on rare occasions, such as when he was young where it had been a regular affair with his parents. Now it had become more for the entertainment of his mistresses.

Of which, he had had several over the years. None of them had captured his interest quite like Miss Granger had. They had been comely, gorgeous witches, truly. But not much beyond that.

No witty conversations, no need to chase.

No need for Draco to conquer.

And as they had been merely mistresses, rather than Ladies, they had no qualms about the end of their arrangements. They merely found a new paramour to care for them and a new living arrangement. Draco had never offered them quite as much as he was now offering *her* ,

either. A place to live, yes. A budget with which they could buy what they wanted. But in the end, he only wanted their company carnally and *hers* ... He wanted her company, period. She challenged him as no witch had before.

A soft chime announced the arrival of company and Draco rose to his feet from the plush chair to greet them.

The curtain was unceremoniously aside and Theo stepped in, and with a flourish he swept the hat from his head. He flashed a grin, "Malfoy. I thought I had seen that blond mop of yours from my box. Whatever brings you here?"

"Nott. I'm attending the Opera." With a wave of his hand, he motioned at the stage before them, "I thought that to be quite obvious?"

"Do not jest with me," Theo said as he dropped into a chair, putting his boots up on the brass railing before him. "You do not attend the Opera unless you are entertaining *fine* company."

Draco scoffed as he resumed his seat, "Do not pretend to know me."

"Am I wrong?"

He debated on how much he wished to divulge to his friend. While their bet still stood, the other wizard had made no further attempts to win. Perhaps he knew he would lose, or he had other schemes up his sleeve. Confiding in Theo of his possible arrangement with the witch would ultimately end their little game. Draco steepled his fingers, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair.

"I am having Miss Granger and her mother join me for the evening," he finally stated.

Theo's head swung around and he looked at Draco, brows furrowing. His legs dropped to the ground as he straightened in his seat. "Once again, I'm aware you have a dislike for the Opera and any other sort of bloody formality. So please indulge my curiosity; why would you invite them here?"

"I have decided to formally court her." He said flatly, holding's Theo's gaze.

A moment of silence and then Theo let out a jovial bark of laughter, " *You?* Courting? I would believe it more if you had said you were joining Her Majesty's army!"

Draco glowered at his companion.

He was right, after all.

But Theo didn't need to know that.

"I know you have no intention of wedding or courting, Malfoy. Spill." Theo was relentless, swiveling the chair until he could face Draco properly.

He ground his teeth together as he looked away, towards the stage where the curtains remained drawn.

“I asked her to be my mistress.”

A moment of stunned silence. Then two. Three. Theo was just staring at him, eyes wide, as if he had somehow grown a third head.

“You asked a *lady* to be your mistress? An actual high-born witch of society?”

Draco waved a dismissive hand, feeling a spike of irritation. “She is not a high-born—“

Theo leveled a look on him, his expression hardening. “*Do not* even think about finishing that sentence. I have the feeling if she were here and you were to slight her *or* her parentage, I would be dragging your *Avada’d* body from here to throw it in my carriage out back.”

“But she isn’t, Nott. Her parents are Muggles. They have no place in our society. Even in their own, they are of the lowest peerage.”

The brunette wizard gaped at him; “They have made their own wealth, is my understanding. Medicinal doctors, in the Muggle world. The Grangers are in *our* world because of their daughter, the one you so callously are inviting to *sin* .”

“First of all,” Draco held up a hand, “how do you know these things *and secondly*, she has already *agreed* to it.”

“To answer your question that you threw out to try to distract me from the topic at hand; I, as a *respectable* gentleman, did my research.” He was pointedly look at Draco now. He rose to his feet, “I decided to ask around for information on the witch we were gambling on. And secondly, how you managed to convince a very uptight witch to defile herself with *you* is beyond me.”

Draco merely lifted his shoulders in a shrug, “She doesn’t wish to marry, nor do I.”

“So you just... assumed to invite her to become your mistress?”

“Yes.”

Theo’s brows rose a notch, his hands hooking on the top of his britches as he rocked back on his heels. “How I wish I could have been a fly on the wall for that conversation.”

“It went rather well.” Draco responded lightly as he looked up at his friend, an amused smirk touching his face as he thought about the conversation that had transpired, “better than to be expected, if I’m being transparent.”

“You, My Lord, must have some *divine spirits* watching over you, is all I have to say to that.”

Draco folded his hands over his lap as he turned away from Theo, “She is coming here, so...”

“To curse you, I hope,” Theo swept his hat off the chair he had discarded it in.

“*Because* ,” Draco drawled, his tone one of boredom, “as I already stated, she has agreed to it. Now can you please leave?”

The other wizard was moving towards the curtain, pausing as he settled his hat upon his head. His expression was curious. “Is she aware of your *history* with mistresses? How you grow tired of them after a few weeks and cast them aside? Also, please don’t tell me you plan to keep her in the townhouse?”

Draco steepled his fingers in thought. He had *not* disclosed his previous partner history with her, but now that Theo mentioned it... He felt his stomach dropping slightly. Undoubtedly, the witch would ask questions. He ignored Theo’s inquiry and moved to the next.

“Why wouldn’t I house her at my townhouse?”

It was in a quaint neighborhood; safe and discreet. And close to his own townhome. Walking distance, really. Draco could visit her as frequently as he wished.

“Oh for fuck’s sake—“ Theo let out a groan, “That’s where you have kept all your previous mistresses.”

“Exactly.”

“Somehow, housing a young miss in the home of *debauchery* doesn’t seem like a grand idea. And one she likely won’t be keen on.”

“Where else would I keep her?” Draco let out a bored sigh as he turned the rings on his fingers slowly. He needed to rid himself of Theo’s company, and quickly. The Grangers would be arriving at any moment. Below them, audience members were already starting to find their way to their seats.

“Seriously? Are you being completely obtuse right now? You make it sound like she is someone you can *own* and I have the feeling she would be livid.”

He deadpanned; “She understands what a mistress is and what the position entails.”

“Does she? Does she *really know* what the *position* entails?”

“Well, when you say it like that—“

“Because I am right. She has no bloody idea what she is getting herself into. She doesn’t wish to marry, but there are other options for someone like her. A Governess. Dance tutor. If she is musically inclined, she could make a living by teaching piano or something similar. Going from a respected member off the ton to a *mistress* is a huge step in the wrong direction.”

“I plan to support her.”

Theo was heated, “Just as you did the others?”

Draco shrugged indifferently, “They were never ladies.”

“That does not make this any more acceptable. You are asking a *lady*, a virginal one, I might add, to give up what little she has in this world to become *your* mistress. Someone you will

cast aside in a few weeks when you can no longer tolerate her,” Theo hissed at him, emerald eyes flashing with indignation.

He let out along suffering sigh, “You make me out to be some monster...”

“I speak the truth. You have not thought this out beyond what lay in your codpiece and it shows. Where will she be when you have ruined her and discarded her?” Theo stated coldly, hand gripping the velvet curtain shut.

“She will be able to find another keeper.”

Draco was not wrong; mistresses of social standing were sought after. They were the ones that you could bring to social events, you could have them on your arm at dinners. Most of the time, these mistresses were still considered ladies and were accepted by polite society. Most dared not make a slight against them, not publicly at least.

“And she will be forever a scarlet woman, is what you are not understanding.”

“She will stay with me as long as I wish her to. She is free to come and go as she pleases. I plan to—“

Theo cut him off, “And what happens when you eventually wed? What then?”

Draco let out a weary sight, “I can have both a wife and a mistress, Nott.”

Many Lord’s did, in fact. It was almost expected of someone of his station as a Duke.

“You have a death wish.” Theo stated, casting him one last glance before he swept the velvet curtain open and disappeared through it. Leaving Draco to his thoughts about his imminent demise at the hands of a very proud and outspoken witch.

~*~

The Royal Opera House on Bow Street was impressive and opulent. Serving both Muggles and the Wizarding community, it was discreet as it was all-encompassing. Wards and charms were placed throughout the sprawling building, disguising box seats and seating areas from Muggles. Most performances were separated so the two communities did not always mingle, but tonight was a new performance.

Hermione linked her arm through her mothers as they entered the towering doors. They were immediately greeted by a working attendant, well dressed in a fine suit.

“Good evening, Madams. How may I assist you this evening?” The gentleman said in a pleasant tone.

Her mother smiled at the man, withdrawing from her clutch two tickets. They had been owed over that morning, directly from the Duke himself. Her mother had been beaming all day, mincing about in excitement and tittering over what they should wear.

The attendant took the tickets, glancing over them before passing them back, "The Wiltshire box is just up the stairs and down the hall. If you need assistance finding it, you will find several ushers along the way. Enjoy the evening, My Ladies."

Her mother slipped the tickets back into her clutch, snapping it shut. "Thank you, Sir."

They walked in the direction they had been told, gathering their skirts as they climbed the stairs. Hermione had hidden her growing excitement from her anxious mama. She knew that her mother wanted and expected her to now court and, hopefully, wed the Duke. But little did she know that they had far more debauched plans.

Plans that Hermione had yet to decide if she wished to tell her parents about.

Because truly, what parent would accept the lifestyle she wished to enter?

Hermione glanced sideways at the petite woman beside her. Her mother was a pleasant enough woman. Kindly, with a genteel air about her as well. While she may be a Muggle, she was fairly well versed in the magical community that her daughter was a part of. Perhaps because she always paid attention to her daughter's studies and she was a quick study. One didn't earn a higher education because they slipped through life on looks and pretty manners. No, her mother was a very astute matron.

The hallways were filled with people bursting about as they searched for their companions, before adjoining to their respective seats and boxes. They smiled politely at those they passed and recognized, but continued onward. Hermione, of course, was able to see what her mother could not. Disillusionment spells over doorways and halls worked to deter Muggles, but only to the point that they did not know about them. Once Hermione pointed out the enchantments, the illusion fell away and her mother was able to glimpse into the hidden world around her.

It was rather charming to witness, really.

To watch the sparkle in her mothers eyes. The way they lit up with amusement and delight.

Hermione had a nagging sense of despair that that sparkle might be distinguished as soon as she found out her daughter wished to become a scarlet woman.

"Ah, here we are," her mothers voice filtered through her thoughts as she was pulled to a halt in front of a heavy red curtain. The bronze plaque mounted on the wall matched the numbers for the tickets they had been given.

The Wiltshire private box.

While the box itself was not dissulusioned, it was warded. Hermione could feel the subtle hum of magic around her as she pulled the cord, which would announce their arrival to the

occupants inside. A faint chime could be heard just on the other side of the curtain and a moment passed. Then two. Finally, the curtain was opened by the Duke himself.

He looked insufferably handsome.

His jacket was some beautifully frivolous piece of custom work, art in itself. A deep shade of emerald so dark it appeared black, hemmed with silver lace and stitching. The cravat at this throat was also a shade of green, to echo the color of his jacket. He wore black trousers, once again, tailored to his lean hips and hugging the curve of his thighs.

Merlin's beard.

Hermione should not be looking at his *thighs*, nor anywhere on his person. Or was she supposed to? Her gaze skittered back to his face, questions on her mind; but to her chagrin, she found a smirk on his face.

What a bloody prat-

“Your Grace,” her mother said charmingly as she dipped her head in a polite curtesy, snapping Hermione out of her embarrassing reverie.

The side eye she received from her ever gracious mother reminded her to also perform polite duties as a young lady and curtsy to the Duke. She did so, but only just. His amused smirk never wavered, silver eyes dancing with an unspoken emotion as she lifted her head to look at him. A part of her mind, a part she had long suppressed and perhaps was aching to break free, was baffled that a wizard as handsome as the Duke would even look in her direction. That a man of his station, would notice someone in hers.

However, the rational part of her mind reminded her firmly that he was not looking at her as a marriage prospect; her station did not matter. Her standing in society did not matter. Her family's wealth meant nothing to him.

This courtship was a farce to hide their true intentions.

Whatever it may fully entail.

Her heart was racing, thundering in her ears as he caught her hand, lifting it to press his lips to her knuckles. Their eyes met over their joined hands as she felt a rush of heat rolling from where his lips touched her through her glove. A mere brush that sent delightful sparks through her arm.

Hermione felt like she was going to combust on the spot from the smolder in his eyes.

“I am honored that you could join me for the evening, Ladies. If you will kindly step into my box...” He straightened, his hand lingering on hers for a moment longer than necessary as he swept the curtain open. Her mother dipped into the box first, chattering with excitement as she flitted by them.

“After you, My Lady,” The Duke purred, his fingers wrapping around her hand as he tugged her a step closer so she stumbled into his chest. Her breath caught as she looked up at him,

her gaze dropping to his enticing lips.

“My Lord,” Hermione responded, her voice far more breathless than she anticipated.

He released her hand as she gave it a light tug, sweeping past him so close her shoulder grazed his chest. She couldn’t tell if it was her breath or his that caught as he swung the heavy curtain shut behind them.

Into the Night

Theo's words echoed in his mind.

How could they not?

Somehow the simple fact that the Viscount had taken the time to learn things about Granger struck him. Why hadn't he done it himself? It would definitely play to his advantage. She appeared to appreciate minor things that most women didn't give a fig about.

The witch that occupied his thoughts had settled into the chair beside him, her fan folded and resting against her knee, gloved fingers wrapped around the slim handle of her Galilean binoculars. Her cloak had been draped over an empty chair behind them, revealing her to be wearing an elegant periwinkle embroidered muslin gown with capped sleeves and trimmed in lace about her delicate neck. Her hair had been swept up into gentle ringlets, tucked beneath a simple satin cap with a pair of white ostrich feathers flowing from the side.

While it seemed she did not favor jewelry, she had donned a pair of simple hanging golden earrings. Her mother had dressed as finely, perhaps in a style more from a prior season.

Hermione Granger, it seemed, did possess the ability to become a rose amongst the wildflowers.

She could easily be someone he could present to society on his arm.

As his mistress, of course.

He studied her beneath his lashes, watching the way she effortlessly smiled at her mother even though he could sense a nervous energy about her. A subtle shift in her demeanor.

But of course; he was asking her to come out of the shadows she lurked in. To step into his world, if only a little.

As Theo had pointed out so bluntly, he was asking far more than just that.

Draco was asking her to give herself to him.

While he, as a high born lord, was more or less able to prance about and do as he wished, she was not. As a woman, there were many expectations of her; to marry and do it well. Moving up from a lower station was the goal set upon most witches.

But not Granger.

He had been able to tell right away that that was not in her nature.

She had no inclination to play such games, nor did it appear she had any interest in them. Of course, the same could not be said for her mother. Not that it was a bad thing, Draco supposed, that a mother would wish the best for her daughter.

The lights in the theatre lowered, indicating the show was to begin shortly.

People below migrated towards their seats, the charmed boxes that lined the walls appeared empty save for the Muggle owned seats. His own booth would appear similar to those who didn't know he occupied it. The illusion only worked to a point before it was broken.

As the torches darkened, the theatre grew quiet with anticipation. The velvet curtains on the stage shifted as the show hands prepared behind the stage.

"You have never been to the Opera?" Draco asked in a quiet voice, leaning towards her. His silver eyes danced away from the stage to her face as she turned to look at him.

Her head tipped slightly, as if to shield her expression from him; "Unfortunately not. My parents were often busy with work when I was young— really, they still are— and it just... never happened. I spent my free time reading and furthering my magical and non-magical education. As I am sure you are aware, women are often limited in our knowledge as we are expected to marry and have children."

Draco considered her words; he did very well know what she meant. Muggle society and the Wizarding one were both similar in the aspect of their expectations and duties they required to be upheld by the men and women. Men would marry, the women would provide an heir. Generally speaking, Purebloods tended to marry other Purebloods in order to keep the magical lines strong.

But options were limited.

You were either marrying a friend, a sibling of a said friend, or a cousin in some relation.

None of those options appealed to Draco.

He truly had no wish to marry one of his female companions such as Pansy or Daphne. Luna had also been a prospect, but there was a bit of murky family history there and he was fairly certain they were distantly related.

Lowering his voice, he cast a glance towards Granger's mother; the Muggle was raptly paying attention to the stage as the curtain opened. "As mine, you will be able to and are encouraged to explore your... curiosities."

His hand had come to briefly cover hers where it rested in her lap; he had discarded his gloves earlier and the satin of hers beneath the pads of his fingers was warm. He could see the quick look she made from beneath her lashes in the direction of her mother before she looked down at his hand.

"And when will my *education* begin?" Granger asked boldly in a whisper, her eyes coming to meet his.

What a bold little minx.

"Tonight, if you wish." Draco murmured, "After the Opera. Come to my townhouse. We can simply talk, if you wish. Perhaps read. Or..." His words trailed off just as his hand wandered

up along her arm, grazing the exposed skin just above her elbow length gloves. Goosebumps danced beneath his fingertips as her lips parted.

“But I cannot—“

“You are a witch, are you not?” He said quietly over her protest. It had been a weak argument, perhaps a natural reaction to his request. “I presume you can figure out a way to sneak out of your home and into mine.”

Draco let his hand fall away with the promise of his words, watching her lashes lower. A dare, perhaps. An urging. Encouraging her to rise to the challenge that she herself embarked on. Perhaps to address issues that Theo had brought to his attention that he had not truly considered.

Ultimately, he *wanted* Hermione Granger.

But he would not wed her; neither of them wanted that. It was binding for life. Marriage was a life sentence, and in many ways, an unpleasant one. Too many people wed only for duty, stuck with someone they could barely stand.

He would much rather keep her in his company of her own violation, until they decided to go their own separate ways to follow paths of their choosing.

Was that so wrong?

Who was the selfish one in this situation? Surely not just him.

Draco was prepared to offer a contract of sorts, detailing the arrangements made between them to offer her a sense of security. While Theo had spoken the truth about his prior mistresses, he did give them a monthly stipend until they could find a new keeper and new home. He had never left a witch without a means of support. He knew asking a lady of status was a new risk, but he fully intended to offer her the same support. If not more.

They fell into a relatively comfortable silence.

It was no longer stunted, as if she were annoyed by him.

So that was a positive.

His gaze would stray from the stage below them, because he really didn't care what the show was about. He had asked *her* here, to ease her further into their arrangement. To slowly tear down her natural defenses she so readily threw up whenever she felt any sort of animosity or involvement she had no interest in.

Ironic, wasn't it?

That she had so openly spurned his attentions and yet here she was.

A curiosity amongst women; because most, while they found him attractive, were after his title and what came with it. Granger had stated plainly that she had no interest in any such

things. Even to the point where it was a deterrent.

The reason she had been a wallflower.

~*~

It was late night when they finally arrived home from the Opera. Hermione had read up on the entire affair that surrounded attending the opera, which was how she had known how to dress. She had been aware that it would go into the wee hours of the night.

The moon was high in the night sky as Hermione peered out the window of her room. The house was silent. Her father had already been asleep and her mother retired with him. Normally, she would be awake for some time longer to read. It was not unusual for her to slip downstairs to find a new book in their small library.

So her parents didn't step into the hall to ask her why she was traipsing downstairs at such an hour.

They did not have servants, so no one interceded there either. The house remained silent and sleepy, the only sound coming from Hermione as she descended the stairs; the rustling of her gown on the steps, the quiet padding of her satins slippers against wood.

Slipping the cloak over her shoulders, she fastened the brooch at her neck and then drew the hood up. It was a heavy piece of her wardrobe, large enough to shield her gown entirely from view. She had changed into a simple, comfortable empire cut dress of pastel, soft lavender that almost appeared white. Her satin slippers were nearly silent on the wood of the hallway as she made her way past the library to the back door.

The gardens were dark and she followed the path to the gate in the back that would lead her out into the alley. She knew the way, letting her feet carry her along the familiar path.

As she reached the gate, she withdrew her wand from the inner pocket of her robe. A glance towards her home, the windows dark, assured her she would not be missed. A couple hours and she would be home before they had risen.

A flick and she cast a disillusionment spell, concealing her from anyone she may happen upon during her short trek. The Duke only lived a few streets over. Cutting through the alleys would help shorten the expected walk time. Her wand would offer her protection. Ideally, with her spell in place, no one would even notice her. She had considered riding one of the thestrals.

Truly, it would make sense.

Toss on a saddle unto its boney back and off she would go. Even if she opted to not fly it but walk it like a traditional horse, it would cut her travel down immensely. But while she inherently had nothing against the beasts, they could be wily. The idea of having it spook and

toss her to the ground like a sack of potatoes— likely into a pile of manure because the street sweepers hadn't come through as of yet— was enough to dissuade her from that venture.

The night air was brisk upon her face as Hermione set out with determination. Her nerves skittered with excitement. She may be a tad defiant and bold, but this was a first entirely for her. She had never left the house after dark.

Certainly, she had never met a *man*.

At his home.

Her breath caught with the thrill of it.

The streets were dark, the flames in the street lamps offering only meager and flickering light. She only used her wand to light the darkest parts of the alleys, slipping through the shadows silently. She danced over puddles, using the cobblestones to keep her feet and skirts clean and dry. Wouldn't due to meet the Duke with skirts dragged through the muck.

But would he truly care?

Unlikely.

This part of town was quiet during the day, the streets watched over by the Bow Street Runners. They did nightly patrol and Hermione expected that she wouldn't run into much trouble. Surely.

Goosebumps danced along her skin the longer she walked, but tucked beneath the layers of her robe, she knew it wasn't a chill.

The hairs on the nape of her neck rose and she turned her head to glance behind her. It felt as if she were being watched. *Followed* by someone. It was an unmistakable feeling. Her breath escaped her lips in a plume of hot air as she quickened her pace. Her disillusionment charm only shielded her so much from view; if someone looked directly into the space she stood, the illusion would fall away and they would see her.

Occasionally, she heard sounds behind her, a soft falling of a shoe against stone. She whipped around a corner and pressed herself against the wall.

A hurried look around assured her she was almost to the Duke's. Perhaps a few more houses away. Just a dash.

Lifting her wand, Hermione turned towards the sounds that had been following her, whispering, "*Homenum revelio.*"

Her magic illuminated two figures in the alley, their forms tucked into the shadows. Hidden from her eyes, revealed by her spell. Her throat constricted at the realization, the implications, of their intentions.

They weren't planning to ask her for directions, that much was sure.

Circe, perhaps it would have been wiser to take a thestral.

They were notoriously protective of their riders despite their fickle nature, and if a person were able to see the beast it was unlikely they would have even approached without a death wish.

Hermione had never used her magic against another, save for silly hexes and jinxes. Her fingers tightened around the wood of her wand, the shaft warm beneath her grip. The magic hummed through her body in response. Her time spent with the Weasley's had prepared her for this; games they played, chase. They had been harmless but she was quick on her feet. She could outrun most men, in fact.

Gathering herself, fingers lifting her skirts to free her legs, she bolted towards the townhouse she sought, throwing a jinx over her shoulder in the direction her *revelio* had shown a man to be. She didn't wait to see if it struck a person or object.

The illusion of her invisibility shattered, she ran.

Footsteps could be heard behind her, paces away.

Hermione ran, whipping a stunning spell over her shoulder. This time she knew she hit her mark, the sound of a curse and a thump following as their body smashed to the ground. Hopefully into the pile of horse manure she had just avoided at the last second.

Sprinting at full speed, she skidded through the grand gates of the Wiltshire townhouse, all subtlety thrown out the window as she launched herself up the stairs and into the door.

"*Alohamora!*" Hermione hissed at the locked door, hearing the click of the locks springing free. She swung it inward and slammed it shut behind her, leaning against the heavy wooden door.

Panting heavily from the run, she squinted against the lights that flared to life in the foyer.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" A portly footman appeared before her, wand in hand and directed at her as he narrowed his eyes.

Hermione lowered her own wand, pushing her hood back from her face as she tried to calm the pounding of her heart as it beat against her ribs, "Hermione. Tell the Duke I am here to see him."

The footman's expression gave nothing away, carefully schooled by years of training. His wand remained on her as his gaze took in her finer clothing. A grunt of disapproval sounded as he lowered his wand from her.

"I will fetch my lord, he is awake; thank the gods." He muttered in irritation, "I would hate to disturb him with a trollop breaking into—"

"Geralt." A drawl sounded from down the yet-dark hallway, followed by measured footsteps. The Duke slipped from the shadows, a frown on his lips as he looked at his footman, "did you just call my guest a *trollop*?"

Hermione's pulse leapt at the sight of the Duke in his own home, opulent in its subtle masculinity. The dark viridian hues complimenting his pallor, enhancing his own beauty. He had discarded his formal jacket and cravat, his shirt untied and loose at this third to reveal his collarbones. He had rolled the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows, and black smudges donned the front of his clothes. He was slowly wiping his hands onto a towel as he prowled closer with slow and measured steps.

The footman blanched at his master's accusing question, "I apologize, Your Grace. It was merely--"

"A discourteous term for the *Lady* Granger." He drawled as he now joined them. "You are dismissed for the remainder of the evening, Geralt."

Geralt was clearly dismayed he had upset his Lord, bowing his head as he tucked his wand away. "Good night, My Lord." He tipped his head in her direction apologetically, "Miss."

They were silent until the footman's footsteps disappeared down the hall, and the Duke turned to look at her. Grey eyes settled on her face, a faint smirk tilting his lips. His hair appeared as though he had raked his fingers through it; fingers which were covered in black smudges.

"You do not need to worry about Geralt. He may be disgruntled, but he is also discreet. He will not speak of your arrival to anyone." His gaze raked her across her face, taking in the flush of her cheeks. "Is your horse outside?"

Hermione shook her head, "Thestral, and no. I walked."

He paused the motion of wiping his hands clean at her words, "You... *walked*? To my home in the middle of the night? Are you of questionable sanity?"

Her fingers rose to the clasp at her throat, her body growing warm now inside his home and no longer in the chilly night air. "'Tis only a short walk."

Shortened because I ran, she mused bitterly to herself.

The Duke was scowling at her, "The streets are a dangerous place for a young lady such as yourself. Magic or not." He seemed to have known what her argument would have been. And he had a point. It was a trip she would not be repeating anytime soon.

"So I've come to realize my mistake, Your Grace." Hermione unhooked the clasp, letting it fall to her shoulders by its weight alone. She gathered the fabric and draped it over her arm.

The Duke stepped forward, holding a hand out to her as his expression softened. It was odd, seeing him like this. Relaxed, far from composed. His formal attire she had only ever seen him in, long discarded. There was something softer about him now, the shadows playing on the planes of his face. The way his eyes rested on her face; demanding, yet requesting at the same time. With a hint of something more, something deeper. Possessive. It sent a shiver down to the pits of her navel.

His eyes raked her face, drifting lower to her lips. His own lifted at the corners in a smirk, as if recalling something.

When his attention returned to her eyes, he continued, “Enough of the formalities, Granger. Please, call me Draco when it is just us. Or, if you find it easier, Malfoy will do. There is no one here but you and I. And you came here for obvious reasons. Let us not dance around it any longer. Let me take your cloak and we can step into my drawing room.”

Tea and Biscuits

The Duke's townhome was both chilly and warming at the same time; the tile made a solid echo beneath their feet with each step. The walls, a dark viridian green yet somehow the color felt warm. Like the green of a forest, late at night. The torches and chandeliers sprang to life as they walked, Hermione trailing behind the Duke. Her fingers danced along the clasp at her throat, her robes swaying around her feet and skirts.

The Duke—*Malfoy, or should she use Draco?*— was silent as he led her down the corridor.

Hermione couldn't help but let her eyes skate along the nape of his neck and along his shoulders; they were broad and hugged beneath his white shirt, which was fitted snugly against his body. He turned into a room and she followed.

His drawing room, she realized, was quite literally just that. While books lined the walls, parchment lay scattered about the massive mahogany table, and two easels sat next to each other. The room was well lit, by far brighter than the rest of the home in its current nighttime state. He threw the rag in his hands onto a chair and turned on his heel to look at her. Sharp grey eyes met hers before sliding down her face to where her hands fumbled with the cloak.

"Let me," he said, stepping forward.

Whenever he came into her space, she felt her lungs seize just slightly. Her breath caught as his hands, larger than her own, brushed her fingers aside and made quick work of the brooch. She felt his knuckles brushing at her jaw and throat, sending little thrills through her body. Once unbuckled, he released one side of the robe and let it fall away from her shoulders as he pulled it to the side.

"You said you walked."

Her eyes rose to his face at his words; she realized she had been staring at the exposed expanses of skin at his throat. The hollow vee between his collarbones. The way the light played and made shadows dance along his alabaster skin.

Her head dipped slightly as she lifted a shoulder in a shrug; "I did. It's but a few blocks from my home—"

The corners of his lips dipped down, "The streets are a dangerous place."

She bristled at being chastised.

"I know I should have just taken a thestral but walking just seemed so much more convenient. Besides, I have magic." Hermione responded lightly, as if she hadn't just run nearly three blocks whilst being stalked by some unknown danger in the alleys.

“Foolish chit,” The Duke—Malfoy, she settled on— threw her robe to a nearby chair without even turning from her, “You think they won’t have magic as well?”

That thought had not occurred to her; the street she lived on tended to be more Muggle centric and as such, she rarely spotted other witches or wizards there.

He was studying her with shrewd steel grey eyes, taking in her silence. He motioned one charcoal stained hand towards the door, “Do you wish to explain why you broke into my home rather than waiting to be allowed entrance?”

Hermione needed to create some space.

“Hm, not particularly.” She shook her head as she tried to step around him. “No.”

He caught her arm and dragged her back to stand before him, his head tilting to the side as he looked down at her. “Your face was flushed— still is, really— and you appeared out of breath in my foyer. You were *running*, and somehow I doubt it was out of pure excitement to see me.”

She lifted her chin, but didn't shrug off his hand. “Don’t flatter yourself. I would never run to a man’s bed.”

The signature smirk returned now, like a cat with cream. His grip on her arm was featherlight, thumb sweeping along the exposed skin between her gloves and the caps of her gown. Heat immediately flourished in its wake. “So you’ve come here in hopes of bounding into my bed, is what you are saying?”

“I did not mean that at all.”

Didn't she? What else had she come here for? Tea and biscuits? She wanted to scoff at herself.

“You’re the one who said it,” Malfoy pointed out, the corner of his lips still lifted in a ridiculous smirk.

“It slipped out,” She stated coolly.

He tutted, clicking his tongue against his teeth, “You said it as a diversion from my question.”

Hermione could go with that; “Possibly.”

“I don’t want you walking the streets at night, alone.” He responded.

As if he had any real say in what she did.

“You’re *not*—“

The Duke held a hand up with a flourish, “I didn’t imply I was. I’m recommending you use that brain of yours and travel safely. I can send a carriage next time.”

She frowned, her brows stitching together. “Have you rescinded your offer or will I be doing this often?”

Sneaking about in the middle of the night.

“I have not. That is an arrangement we must discuss further and I wish to give you a tour of the property before you decide to live there. As well as I await for you, for some inane reason, to break the news to your charming parents that you plan to live a debauched life as my mistress.”

Hermione could barely contain the groan that escaped her lips, “When you say it like that, it sounds utterly terrible...”

“You are the one who had raised the concern in the first place,” he pointed out. “I suggested we pursue the courting front and figure out an arrangement from there, sans including the parental units.”

She didn't wish to talk about her parents right now; “Well I’m here now. Let’s discuss this arrangement in depth, yes?”

“Delightful. Should I call for tea?”

“Are you being utterly serious?” Hermione was baffled.

“Are you not?” He had moved away from her, pausing at his desk.

“No, Your Grace, I do not wish to have tea.”

“Then *just* the biscuits?”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“It’s called a snack, Granger. I can have Geralt whip it up—“

Hermione crossed the room to join him at his desk, tilting her head as she pointed out; “You’ve dismissed him for the night, remember?”

His shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Ah, he never wanders far.”

She forgot how privileged the Duke was; a bevy of servants and likely house elves at his disposal. A snap of his fingers, and they would leap from bed to answer their masters summons. How obnoxious. She absolutely did not want him to disturb one of his staff in the middle of the night; also, the less people who knew of her arrival at the Duke's home, the better. She was quite aware how the help liked to gossip. Primarily because they had done it with her on numerous occasions.

“Your Grace.”

“My Lady.”

“*Malfoy*.”

“Hermione.”

Oh, her name simply rolled off his tongue and sent a shiver through her entire person.

“I don’t want a *snack*. I’m here to see you.”

~*~

If a pin were to drop, you would have been able to hear or down the hallway. Hermione Granger was many things, Draco was aware, but that bold confession caught him off guard.

Then again, when had she never been direct and to the point? It was her primary appeal, after all.

He didn’t immediately respond, instead turning his head to the side as he idly straightened the stack of parchment on his desk. He had not doubted that Granger would come to him tonight; he had put the offer out there at the Opera and somehow he knew she would take it. Because of who she was, she would come. Granger had agreed to this arrangement between them and her own curiosity and drive to discover answers and explore things she didn’t know or understand.

She had asked a question and she had risen to his challenge.

He looked at her from beneath his lashes.

“You’ve come here because you wish to see what it means to be a mistress, yes?” Draco asked as his fingers came to rest atop the papers.

“So I’ve said, more or less,” she responded, her voice losing that annoyed edge it had had moments before. Perhaps because he was now steering the conversation into areas unknown to her.

Draco straightened as he held a hand out towards her, “Let me show you.” At her visible uncertainty, he continued softly, “We can stop anytime if you wish. This is for you to help make the final decision. If you decide you do not want this, you may go and we can consider this null.”

That seemed to soothe any lingering doubts and her shoulders straightened with a quiet determination; her hand coming out to settle into his palm. The silk of her glove was cool against his hand. His fingers wrapped around hers and with a gentle tug, he pulled her a step closer. Another, and her skirts swept across his shoes.

He lifted her hand, fingers pointed in the air and with two fingers, gripping the tip of her pointer finger.

“You don’t need these any longer,” Draco pinched the fabric, pulling it slowly upward.

The glove slid off without fuss, and he discarded it on the table beside them. He repeated the action with her other hand. Her skin was soft and smooth beneath his, and he turned her hand over in his. He ran a single finger along the curve of her knuckles, trailing it along the back of her hand to her wrist.

He watched her hungrily, taking in the way her cheeks became a subtle shade of rose, her lips parting unconsciously as she watched his every move. Her pulse fluttered beneath his fingers as he lifted her hand pressing a kiss to each finger in tandem. He flattened her hand, placing a kiss against the smooth expanse of her palm, the tips of her fingers brushing his cheek. A sharp inhale from Hermione teased his ears as his lips drifted along her skin, featherlight, and coming to rest against the sensitive skin of her wrist.

“Are you comfortable with this?” He asked, grey eyes pinned to hers as his lips grazed where her pulse leapt.

No snarky remark met his question, but she tipped her head in a nod.

“Perfect,” Draco purred, lifting her wrist higher. His lips continued their quest, teasing along the curve of her arm until he reached the crook of her elbow, her hand resting over his shoulder. “Did you like that?”

Her lashes fluttered before her eyes lifted to his face, her tongue coming out to wet her lips. “It was quite... Pleasant.”

“Hmm, that’s only a mere fraction of what you can experience,” he murmured, his free hand coming up to catch her chin between his fingers. He tilted her face towards his, “May I kiss you?”

“Do you plan to ask permission every time?” Granger asked in a quiet voice, arching a brow at him.

A smirk touched his lips, “Not at all. I like to take what I want. I’m merely being nice to soothe your delicate sensibilities.”

“Toss sensibilities aside and just kiss me, Malfoy.”

Of course she would be bold.

He did as she demanded, his lips settling over hers. Gentle at first was his kiss, her lips were soft and pliant beneath his. He kept it as such, coaxing her to respond as she felt comfortable. He had never been with an untouched woman before, but Draco wasn’t daft. He was aware he would have to take it slow, to ease her into it. To create a want and need for Granger to crave more.

So he did; his hand came to rest on the dip just above her hip, the silken fabric curving beneath his palm to mold to her waist. She wore no corset or boning, and he delighted in the

feel of *her*, the way her body keened under his simple touch. Normally women were encumbered by their fashion; yet he could only feel her heat, curves.

Draco eased his lips away but she followed; one hand coming to rest against his chest, he could feel a slight tremble rolling through her body. As she pressed herself to him, her lips fluttering and awkward against his, he slid his hand to her back. His fingers spread along her spine, arching her into him as he let her build her confidence with her kiss. Shy, and yet eager. Her arm was still hooked over his shoulder, coming to wrap around his neck as she leaned up to deepen the kiss.

In response, satisfied she was exploring her curiosity, he responded by sliding one of his hands down along her back to the top curve of her arse, at the same time his other ghosted lightly along the exposed skin of her shoulders, tracing the fabric.

His own skin lit with fire as he felt the tip of her fingers venturing to push the collar of his shirt wider, coming to graze along his collarbones. Her kiss became more assured as those same fingers dipped beneath his shirt, her palm warm as she pressed it to his skin.

His arousal stirred, awakening at her innocent little touches. At the way she curved her body against his, her breasts pressed into his chest. The way the air fell from her lips when she broke away to breathe, her lashes fluttering over whiskey brown eyes, darkened with desire. She was molded to his body, his hand sliding over the curve of her *derrière* to cup it, lifting her as he pressed his knee between her legs. Her skirts bunched around him, impeding his true intentions but also reminding him to stay slow. As he lifted his knee into the apex of her legs, he felt the heat radiating from her core against the top of his thigh.

A slight sound fell from her lips as his hands came to grip her arse, softly at first. His palms pressed against her as his fingers flexed, lifting her to her toes as he pushed his leg between her thighs and pulled her onto his, causing her to grind against him.

Draco kept her there, nearly perched on his thigh as his lips returned to hers and his hands held her captive. When her breathing hitched, fractured as a slight whimper left her lips, is when Draco eased her back down to the ground.

“Stay the night,” he said against her lips. Her eyes grew wide but he shook his head, “In a bed of your own. I don’t want you trying to walk the streets at such an hour.”

There was a hesitancy but Draco smoothed his hands along her back as he righted her. His hands moved to hers where they still lay against his chest, his fingers curling into her palm as he lifted her hands to his lips.

“Your Grace...”

“Draco, remember? Or Malfoy will suffice,” he responded, his voice a low rumble as he pressed a kiss to each knuckle, his eyes on hers.

“Malfoy,” she conceded and he felt a subtle thrill run through his body. “I will stay for a little longer.”

~*~

He did not immediately take her upstairs; as Hermione gathered her thoughts after *whatever that was*, she cast a look around the room. The Duke's drawing room was as it had appeared when she first entered. But now she was further into the space, she was able to see his work. Stacks of loose parchment sat upon his desk. Discarded charcoal and smudging tools littered about in a careless manner. It was rather disarmingly charming to imagine the normally perfectly coiffed and poised Duke having a bit of disarray in his life. To allow his clothes to become wrinkled and dirty. His hands, normally pale as carved marbled, to be covered in charcoal.

Hermione smoothed her hands along the front of her gown as she glanced towards the Duke. Malfoy, as he insisted he call her.

She couldn't quite pin what she felt when she looked at him, what to call the heat that curled through her body. How her skin had *burned* from the slightest touch. The hollow ache deep between her legs.

Was this what desire felt like?

She moved towards one of the easels, looking at the nearly empty canvas that rested on them. Broad strokes had been made and hasty sketch marks.

"So you are into the arts?" Hermione asked quietly as she studied the canvas, turning to look over her shoulder at the Dr— *Malfoy*.

He had followed her with his eyes, dark like hardened steel. "Surprised?"

A shoulder lifted in a shrug, "Perhaps a bit. You don't remind me of someone who indulges in a frivolous hobby."

A perfect dark brow arched at her as a bemused smile teased his lips- lips which she had just devoured like a starving person only moments before. "Perhaps that is why I enjoy it. You forget my life is not as simple as it appears. Art is an escape for me, much the same as reading is for you, I presume."

She was quiet for a moment as she considered him and his words; she didn't know the inner workings of being a Lord, born into wealth, beyond what she had witnessed from the Weasley's or Harry. Truth be told, she understood little of his world.

"Let me take you upstairs to retire for the night," he stated before she could respond.

He had gathered her robe from the chair he had discarded it into earlier, draping the fabric over his arm as he held a hand out towards her. She took it once more, with a little less hesitancy than before.

They exited into the darkened hallway, and withdrew his wand with his free hand to silently light the way. The light of his wand cast long shadows around them as they climbed the stairs. His shoes echoed in the silence. The townhome he resided in while in London was opulent and massive, no expense had been spared in its grand decorations.

Hermione looked at each of the paintings as they moved down the second floor hall; they shifted and jostled magically in their frames, but most of their residents remained asleep. The charmed paintings still caught her off guard at times, having grown up without being exposed to them until later in life. The first time she had ever seen one, the knight in the painting had spoken to her and given her such a fright she had dashed from the room for fear of it being haunted.

Malfoy drew her to a halt as they neared the far end of the hall, releasing her hand to open the door. He swung it inward and motioned for her to enter.

The bedroom was larger than her own at home, but comfortable and grand nonetheless. She had not known what to expect in a spare room of a Dukes home, but this seemed to fit her imagination. The furniture was painted white, adorned with beautiful brass knobs that glinted in his wand light as he followed behind her. The bed was a massive four poster, draped in elegant yellow blankets and sheets.

“Make yourself comfortable. I will have an elf bring up a meal in the morning before you return home.” Malfoy said quietly as he lingered just by the door.

Elf?

Her mind leapt through her memories, until she came across one; he meant house elf. Servants to those in the Wizarding community. They performed the same tasks as footman and other such servants in a non magical household. Of course, someone of his peerage would have both.

“You’ll not be joining me?” Hermione asked as she turned to look at him. He shook his head in response as he carefully set her robes down on her bed for the night.

He gave her a smile, a subtle dimple appearing upon one cheek as he lifted his wand. “Not tonight, Granger. Soon. But not now.”

She tipped her head in acknowledgement; she wasn’t sure how to respond to that or address her feelings of it. Was she disappointed that he had decided to wait? Flattered? *Confused?* What was his reasoning for waiting, if there were any? She has agreed to become his mistress already, even if they hadn’t delved into the finer details of the arrangement. He has said he wished to show her the townhome he would house her in. Did he mean that to happen soon? Would that be when he claimed her?

“Goodnight, Miss Granger,” Draco interrupted her musings, his light fading as he receded out the door. His hand settled on the knob as he looked towards her.

“Goodnight...” she offered him a smile, unknowing if he could see it. “Draco.”

Scandal, Perhaps?

Dearest Readers,

Does thou eyes deceive me?

A stately carriage with a daunting crest carved into the side was spotted leaving the Wiltshire residence at the wee hours of the dawn. Wherever could it be headed at such an odd hour? We know the Duke himself does not like to rise early. Company, perhaps? A new woman of the night? We know the Duke does not wish to wed, but what is it he does seek?

*Your ever watchful writer,
Lady Quibbler*

After rapping the brass handle against the white painted door to the Granger residence, it swung open. The portly Muggle father of Hermione stood there, his mustache coiled and curled tightly at the tips, his greying hair swept back into a knot at the nape of his neck. Blue eyes, so dissimilar to his daughters, settled on Ginny and her brother, Ron.

“Ah, the Weasley’s! How do you do this morning?” He squinted out into the street behind them, the sun glaringly bright in its early hours, “‘Tis barely past breakfast. I assume you are here for my daughter?”

Ginny smiled at the kindly man, “Yes, we are looking for Hermione. We are heading to the shoppes and wanted to see if she wished to tag along to the bookstore.”

Mr. Granger opened the door wider to allow them access, glancing past them to their handsome open top carriage where the footman and a chaperone waited. “You are free to come inside. Hermione hasn’t woken yet, not that I’ve seen. Perhaps she is still getting ready.”

Waving a gloved hand, Ginny pulled off her simple cap and shoved it into her brother's hands as she entered the townhome. “That’s quite alright, Mr. Granger. I can just skip up there and take a peek. She won’t mind my barging in. Ronald can wait down here like the good lad he is.”

Ronald was not amused, glowing at his sister. He had tagged along of course, eager to spend time with his favorite sibling and her friend. *Their* friend, really. Which was an uncommon arrangement, surely. It was difficult to befriend the opposite gender without the entire ton having some expectation or gossip, yet somehow they had done just that.

Before her brother could retaliate with an answer, Ginny bounded away from him, gathering her skirts as she dashed up the stairs. She made quick work of them, barely winded, as her flat shoes carried her towards her friends room. She may wear the dress, just as Hermione did, but that did *not* make her a delicate flower. Ginny had grown up with six brothers, and if she were honest with herself, she was surprised she even knew how to sew or dance.

She rapped her knuckles against the door to her friend's chambers, counting to five in her head before repeating it, "Hermione? We are to go to the shoppes today. Care to join us?"

Silence.

Which was unseemingly for the witch.

Whom was never silent.

Ginny knocked again, a tad more urgency and loudly. Perhaps Hermione was sleeping in? Although that was unusual for her, as well.

Making a noise of a consideration, a quiet *humming* sound, Ginny reached for the door and found it unlocked. She swung the door inward, glancing into the bedchamber. The room was dark, the curtains drawn. The Grangers did not have any maids or footmen, so no one would have come up to stroke the fire or awaken the witch. The bed was still neatly maid and two cloaks were spread out over the end, as if Hermione had been trying them on.

Crossing the room, Ginny looked at the discarded clothing; a set of riding boots and robe, as well as a black set of robes.

One more glance around the space, and she reaffirmed her suspicions that Hermione had not even slept in her bed last night, which begged the question: where *had* she slept?

Descending the stairs, Ginny was met with a puzzled look from both her brother and Mr. Granger.

"I forgot," Ginny stated calmly, a placating smile upon her face, "That we agreed to meet *at* the shoppes. She must've already left and we've just missed her."

Her father was silent for a moment, his thick dark brows furrowing over his bright eyes. From what Ginny knew of the man, he worked chaotic hours in the medical field; she could not quite remember if he worked in a secondary school in education or at a hospital, but she did know he would come home at odd hours.

"Ah, yes. Perhaps. I've only just arrived home myself. I must've missed her," he muttered in reply.

"It happens, you are a busy man. I will give her your regards," Ginny responded lightly, smiling at him as she grabbed her brother's arm and hauled him from the establishment.

"But we—" Ron started when Ginny shushed him.

The door to the carriage opened and Ginny climbed inside first. Once the door was shut she leveled a look on her brother, "She isn't here."

Ron's nose scrunched in confusion, "What do you mean, '*she isn't here*'? She ought to be here. Her father clearly assumed she was. She doesn't have a lady's maid or footman to accompany her on outings so—"

“She didn’t sleep in her room at all.”

A hush fell over them as the carriage jostled into motion. The rumble of the wooden tires along the pavers drowned out the steam that was clearly about to burst from her brother's head as the gears turned in his mind. Sometimes he could be daft. The carriage turned the corner to head through the alleyway, a shortcut to avoid the hem and haw of the streets.

Ginny was quiet as she stared ahead, mulling over her latest interactions with her friend. Had there been something she had missed? What could it be?

The carriage slowed, the pair of red mares prancing as they were forced to come to a halt in the narrow alley. Another carriage, elegant and most certainly from a high lord, blocked their passage. Massive black steeds stood at attention, waiting for their cue to move.

The footman, wrapped in a stately uniform of silver and viridian green, stepped down to open the door of the waiting carriage after placing a stool. A woman descended the steps, her hood falling back from her robes and Ginny sprang upright, an audible gasp leaving her lips as she immediately recognized her friend.

She swiftly threw her own door open, leaping to the ground and dashing over to Hermione. She unceremoniously grabbed the witch’s hand, dragging her away from the gate that would lead her into the gardens at the back of her family townhome.

“You need to come with me, *right now*.” Ginny hissed, pulling the startled witch to her own carriage.

“Ginny— What are you—“ Hermione tried to pry her hand free half heartedly, but followed her with a glance over her shoulder at the stately black carriage.

“Your father assumes you’ve gone to the shoppes this morning. Because when I came to get you, you were *gone*. Nowhere to be found. Your bed, still kept and empty.”

“Maybe I rose early and merely made my own—“

“You do not *rise early*, Hermione. Now *get in the carriage*, and share your secrets.”

~*~

Hermione sat ramrod straight beside Ginny as the carriage rumbled down the street. Her mind was reeling as she tried to comprehend what she should say. She was in shock over the fact her friend had found her slinking in through the alley like some feral cat.

In hindsight, she should have confided in her friend about her plans.

Yet she had not, and now she sat guilty beside her. Caught, like a lobster within a net. Her brother, Ron, was studying her silently through narrowed eyes.

The entire ride was awkward and painfully silent.

It wasn't as if Hermione had intended to keep this a secret from her friends; they were supposed to be amongst the first she told. Yet, she had not simply for the fact that she had not decided how to phrase her decision. Their arrangement. It was a rather delicate topic, after all.

One that undoubtedly Ronald and Harry would understand, but not Ginny.

"Spit it out," Ginny insisted from beside her.

Hermione cleared her throat as she glanced at the redhead beside her. She folded her hands carefully in her lap, poised and delicate. As if she had not just spent the night at the Duke's home. Nothing had occurred beyond that heated kiss, but her entire body sang with some unknown heat and expectation for more.

"I will, if you promise to me that this will, first and foremost, remain between us and that you do not overreact." She stated simply, looking between the two siblings.

Ron leaned back in his bench, the wind tossing his red hair about as the carriage bounced down the street. He rode backwards, of course, as was proper so the ladies could face frontwards. He looked clean and sharp in his pressed suit; the quality was nowhere near as impressive as something the Duke would own, but it was handsome nonetheless. He owned no title, but he was a soldier. He had wealth of his own, and a story to go with it.

"You know my word is solid," Ron replied and Hermione then looked to the witch beside her.

The one whom *did* like to gossip.

She rolled her eyes as she huffed in false affront, "Yes, yes. I swear as well."

Hermione let out a sigh and then cleared throat, "I am... I am tentatively courting someone. Or rather, they are me."

The siblings stared at her as if she had sprung a second head, and perhaps she had. Why, only weeks ago she had clearly stated she had no intent to wed. What other purpose is there to courtship but an eventual proposal?

"You are being courted?" Ginny asked suspiciously.

"But a respectable suitor is supposed to call upon the lady, and not the other way around," Ron pointed out.

To which he was right.

"Wait, I swear I saw something in the Morning Post, specifically the gossip column. You attended the opera, did you not?" Ginny asked suddenly before Hermione could formulate a response, "Yes, yes I did. You were in the company of the Duke."

“Wiltshire? As in that twat Malfoy?” Ron’s jaw had dropped and his mouth gaped in the most unappealing manner. A flick of her wrist and his teeth snapped shut.

“ *Yes* ,” Hermione hissed, “Do keep your voice down.”

“You were at the Duke’s *home*? Your parents were unaware you had left and you do not have a lady’s maid—“

Ron was gaping again.

He might catch a fly at this rate, Hermione thought.

He was growing upset, clearly surprised at her seeming lack of forethought; “I cannot fathom why you would assume to go to a man’s home, *unchaperoned*—“

Perhaps she would let him choke on any bug that might venture into his mouth.

Unlike her brother, Ginny was smirking as if she were a cat with warm milk. “Spare no details!”

“Perhaps later, when we are alone and not under the ever watchful and omnipotent ears of the ton,” Hermione muttered to the pair. They would be the death of her, she swore. Likely to ruin her scheme that she had afoot. Oh why did her companions have to be meddlesome, tiresome and persistent Weasley’s?

~*~

As the first rays of sunlight had pierced into his room through the dark drapes that covered his windows, Draco had merely stared at the canopied ceiling of his bed for some time. He had barely slept a wink during the night, rather spending the time tossing about helplessly.

The object of his desires, the very bane of his existence as she outpaced him and outmaneuvered him at every turn, was asleep just down the hall.

And Draco had to wonder; how did the prim and proper Hermione Granger sleep at night?

Did she sleep upon her back, as some might do? As if to not muss up her curls or wrinkle her face? Did she lay on her side, perhaps clutching at a pillow as if it were another. Or did the proper young miss sprawl out upon the bed in a wild abandon, so unlike her usual wound self?

And even of further importance; did she sleep in a gown or nude?

When she became his mistress, would she welcome him with bare skin and an eager body? Or would he peel away the layers of a night gown, where he could press a kiss upon each inch as swatches of pale skin were revealed to him.

He let out a nearly silent groan as he pressed a hand to the growing hardness of his member as it stirred beneath the silk sheets, the fabric cool against the heat of his skin. Draco didn't know how someone so innocent could arouse him so easily. He usually preferred experienced partners. Someone who knew how to please him, to exhaust him. And yet...

Yet...

Somehow he knew this witch who occupied his thoughts was going to give him a run for his wealth.

She had boldly snuck to his home in the dead of the night, willing to indulge the curiosity that gnawed at her mind, to fulfill her undying quest for knowledge.

And he could have taken her.

Granger was willing, eager.

Ready and pliant beneath his hands, he had felt her body trembling at the barest of touches.

Circe, he had no idea how he had held himself back from throwing her atop his desk. From ravaging her sweet innocence right then and there. Every fiber of his being had been pulsing and coiled, ready to pounce and devour her. But perhaps that was why he had opted to wait; there was something undeniably painful and delectable at the idea of making her wait. He didn't want her like some common whore. He wanted to ruin her in a way she would never forget.

That *he* could never forget.

A rare opportunity, to claim someone so sweetly innocent and he was not about to squander it.

So it had been with great reluctance that he had ushered her to bed. Alone. To perhaps give her a taste of the luxury he would offer her as his mistress, perhaps to make her want him as he wanted her.

But his thoughts were finally disturbed when one of the house elves popped into his room, bringing the fire to life to warm the chill from the air.

Her little face appeared beside the bed, ears bobbing as wide eyes looked up at Draco; "Good morning, Master Malfoy. The Missus is awake as well. Should Millie prepare breakfast for you two—"

He shook his head, "No. I do not wish to dine with Ms. Granger this morning. I need the carriage prepared to bring her home before she is missed."

Millie, the house elf, was quiet for a moment before she left the room with a loud *crack*. They didn't need to know the details of their arrangement, even though he was keenly aware the elves and staff of the Manor were intimately aware of the entire families comings and goings. There were no secrets in the house, no matter how discreet he wished them to be. They would never gossip outside of the home, but they were aware of everything.

Once alone again, Draco threw the sheets away from his naked body. The morning air in the room was still cold against his bare skin as he crossed to wardrobe to don a simple white muslim shirt and pair of trousers. Once appropriately situated and decent, Draco stood before the full-length mirror and raked his fingers through his bed tousled hair to rid it of the unruly wave that formed.

Satisfied, he moved to his door and into the hall.

From somewhere down the corridor, he heard the distinct sound of another door opening and closing, followed by quiet footsteps as if the owner were tiptoeing. Draco supposed he could inform her that his mother resided in the country estate and the townhome was completely empty of family except for him, but he rather mused over the idea of the witch slinking through the halls. He doubted it was something she did often.

“Good morning, Granger,” Draco said in a low whisper as she rounded the corner. He casually leaned against the wall, ignoring the grumbling of the portrait as his shoulder bumped the frame.

Wide, whiskey brown eyes met his as she visibly leapt, as if she had assumed to slip from his home unnoticed.

“Heavens, Your Grace—“

“Draco, remember?” He interrupted.

She pressed a hand to her chest as she shook her head, “*Malfoy*. You startled me. I had assumed you meant to sleep in and I could just—“

“Sneak out of my home?” Draco chuckled, a low sound that rumbled through his chest, “As if I am not aware of the comings and goings of everyone inside my own home.”

Granger was quiet as she considered him, and he studied her. She looked rather well put-together for a witch who had slept in another man's home. Despite the fact she wore yesterday's clothing, it would be rather easily overlooked once she donned her robe. Her hair had been swept into a bun atop her head, perhaps in a slightly more wayward manner than was commonplace in the current fashion but seemed to befit her. Curls bounced free of her attempts to tame them, framing her face prettily and teasing her neck.

Unable to resist the allure, Draco reached a hand out to catch one of those tantalizing and rebellious curls and wound it about his knuckle slowly. She tipped her head as he tugged lightly on the strand.

“I should get home before anyone realizes I’m missing,” she said quietly, her pupils growing wider as she looked up at him.

She was not wrong; it had been the intention, after all.

Their arrangement was supposed to be discreet so as not to ruin her public image; they were to court in the eyes of the ton and go their separate ways after any events they attended

together, with none the wiser.

Draco released the curl, watching it fall and tease the curve of her neck once more. "I had the carriage readied for you. I imagine you do not have to dally much longer. It can take you home posthaste."

Her lashes fell to shield her eyes from him, her lips turning down at the corners ever so slightly. Was this a moment of shyness from the witch? The subtle gesture caught him off guard.

"Will you be escorting me home?"

The quietly uttered question threw him off for a moment. He had not thought of the fact that she might wish his company for the carriage ride home.

A moment of silence passed until she looked up at him and he tipped his head, "If that is what you wish, I can."

And so after hastily dressing into more appropriate clothing for his impromptu journey to the Granger residence, Draco found himself seated beside the witch in his stately carriage. Their knees jostled together as the carriage rumbled along the cobblestone, the silence filled with the sound of hooves clattering in a rhythmic manner. He could not quite figure out why she would have requested his presence on the ride, but he was not about to deny her of it. It was not as if it was uncomfortable; quite the opposite. She brought a quiet to him that most did not offer.

The carriage rocked to a halt and Draco lifted the corner of the curtain over the window to peer outside; "we've arrived."

Granger pivoted sharply in her seat, her face determined as her hands clenched and scrunched the front of her gown. Before he could even grasp the moment, she had leaned forward and her lips collided with his. The kiss was tight, her lips unmoving as she seemed to hover. The kiss of an innocent; but he was more than eager and amused at her attempt and desire to follow through on what she wanted. Draco reached a hand up to the side of her face, fingers teasing along the curve of her jaw as he parted his lips, coaxing her to imitate him. Her own lips softened against his as his hand slid into her hair, drawing her closer to him until she was nearly in his lap.

He allowed her to explore the kiss herself, her lips teasing along his as she grew more confident. He felt the tip of her tongue darting out to trace the curves, tasting him. He craved more but he held himself back. Draco wanted her to be comfortable in the intimacy they were going to be indulging in.

Moments seemed to pass by quickly as the heat flourished between them, her hands coming to rest upon his shoulder as she shifted into his lap. He felt his own arousal growing as she straddled his thighs, her skirts bunching up around her own legs as his hands gripped her waist as he held her firm.

Surely he was going to combust, right here in the carriage.

Her sweet innocence, determined as she was, was going to be his undoing.

With great effort, Draco broke the kiss and leaned his head back. He struggled to catch his breath; somehow the witch seemed to have stolen it from him. His fingers flexed against her hips as he eased her back.

“Not here,” Draco managed to ground out, his voice like gravel as he forced himself to speak. “Not now.”

Her lips were swollen and her cheeks flushed as she looked at him, her brows furrowing slightly, “Did you not—?”

He groaned.

“ *Merde* , Granger. I loved it. See?” Before he could stop himself, he grasped her hand and guided it down between their bodies to his trousers; a slight sound fell from her lips as her fingers settled over the bulge that had formed there, her eyes growing wide. “I desire you. I ache for you.”

Her fingers traced the outline that had formed around his shaft, sending a jolt of pleasure through him he had not accounted for. He gripped her wrist, pulling her hand away to save himself. He would have to wait to let her satisfy her curiosity when they weren’t in a bloody carriage in the middle of the ton. He enjoyed many things, but deflowering a maiden on the bench was not high on his list.

Draco leaned forward to kiss her lips, which seemed to be stuck in a delightful oval.

“I’ll call on you later,” he promised.

A promise he might one day regret, but it was all he could think about in that moment.

No Secrets Kept

Nearly an entire week had passed from her nighttime sprint through the alleyways to the Duke's home. So far, Hermione felt no regrets over such a reckless act. If anything, she felt the bite of excitement nipping at her heels. A faint hum of adrenaline she had never felt before still sang in her body.

Had it been the chase that caused that?

Or had it been the knowledge she was doing something so inherently inappropriate? That others would frown upon her actions and yet she was doing it— for herself? Because Hermione had made a decision that most in her position would not dare to do and she understood the risks of such a plan. There were many risks to her, more so than him.

As a male, a Duke on top of it, Malfoy was nearly impervious to any type of slander or gossip. As it was for most males of their world.

The park was rather quiet this morning, many people still sleeping off the night before. During the peak of the season, it was not uncommon for the members of the town to imbibe and be frivolous all night, and then to lie in until the late lunch hour. Unless one had callers, one rarely had a reason to rise early. The principal events that occurred during the season were the balls and soirées, with the occasional dinner or luncheon. Any other activities, such as flaunting about the market or parks was merely an additional and influential experience.

With no people to discreetly observe, Hermione turned her attention back to the book in her lap. Her mother was just down the path gossiping with one of their Muggle neighbors, leaving her to her thoughts and solitude.

It was common for members of the ton to have footman or lady's maids to accompany their children, but they had none in their employment. Still new to the wealth, the Grangers had opted to continue their comfortable way of life. They had survived many years without the extra help, and there was no reason to start with hiring them now. They had a cook, and that was about as much as they needed. Her parents had inquired with the Weasley's about hiring a house elf— only to find out that they were not technically available for *hire*, per say. Most of the elves in the wizarding homes of London's elite were more or less in continual servitude, their lives sentenced to serve and obey the lords and ladies of their ancestral homes.

It was, perhaps, a touch barbaric to think about.

Turning the page, Hermione tried to focus on the words of the book resting in her lap. They blurred before her eyes as her mind wandered. She had the tendency to use the quiet time like this to just ponder things.

She remained there for some time, undisturbed or unbothered by anyone. Her mother would mingle and meander about, leaving her to her privacy.

The crunch of the gravel beneath boots reached her ears as someone walked along the path. She didn't bother to acknowledge them, as most people continued past without much of a word beyond the polite greeting.

It wasn't until the sound drew nearer and louder that she became aware that they were indeed approaching her. There was no other sound like the accompanying rustle of skirts, the dainty steps of a woman's boots or slippers. These steps were that of a man. Their boots were heavy and steps assured as they turned towards her. Her eyes flicked at the man's calf high boots as he neared as he entered into her peripheral vision. Hermione could simply ignore him; it certainly was not out of character for her to do so. She was mostly, if anything, polite based on circumstance only. Her mildly haughty reputation did precede her in that aspect.

Hermione counted to five in her head, hoping that perhaps the approaching gentleman would notice her disinterest, divert and go elsewhere.

But as she reached six, they stopped before her.

Merde .

Hermione looked up from her book at the man that hovered before her. A familiar face of her longtime friend and companion stood before her. She had fully intended to ignore Harry but alas, she knew she could not. She could perhaps tell him to shove off, but he was nearly as stubborn as her and would not acquiesce.

There goes her solitude.

She let out a slightly-louder than necessary sigh.

"You may sit, Harry," Hermione grumbled as she motioned to the empty spot on the bench beside her.

Hooking his silver embossed cane on his arm, Harry sat with a flourish. He flicked his coattails from beneath him as he then turned emerald eyes onto her. Shaded beneath the brim of his hat, they sparkled like the gems they were. Vivid shades of green scrutinized her, judging her and how to approach whatever questions were on his mind. She could tell by his rigid posture that he had thoughts he wished to express, and was clearly debating on how best to approach it.

She lifted her book and returned her attention to words before her; he could speak when he was ready. She was in no mood to humor him and had been content to be alone.

"I called on you several times, Hermione." Came Harry's words at last. "You weren't home."

Hermione remained silent as he finished; how did one explain the reason they were not home was due to be *elsewhere* ? Young women did not merely disappear without a purpose or intent in mind; visiting other witches, taking a stroll through the market, afternoon tea... Not to mention, such aforementioned young *unwed* women did not visit unmarried men. It was severely frowned upon and reputation ruining. Hermione managed her companionship with

the Marquis and Baron simply because of her friendship with Ginny. It was one of the times that things like this could be overlooked.

There was no prior friendship with the Duke. No siblings with which she may befriend. Their farce of a courtship had not been made public yet.

No, she had been sneaking out to visit the Duke— *Malfoy*— under the cover of night. They had done nothing damaging to her reputation as of yet, but it did not take much in this society. The simple action of her being alone in his home was damning enough.

Malfoy had been quite courteous in that matter, moving slowly to make her comfortable in her own body and mind. His hands had been light, teasing, touching... His lips—

She turned the page sharply as she became aware she was still being surveyed, “Did you now? I must’ve been out.”

“You do not like to leave the house,” Harry pointed out. “Nor are you an early riser. And yet, you’ve been away every time. According to your mother, visiting the Weasley’s.”

Hermione had told her parents she spent much of her time with Ginny, going to shops and parks together. It was a white lie; she did tend to run into Weasley. Or rather, Ginny and her meddling brother seemed to run into her. Truly, it offered a relatively flawless excuse when she returned home for luncheon.

“I do enjoy going out. I’m out right now,” She motioned to the park about them.

He was looking at her steadily, clearly waiting for her to crack. He knew she could keep her mouth quiet about almost anything if she truly wished it. She was not a wallflower for nothing. Secrets and being invisible were her primary function.

“You were not at the park, Hermione. Don’t lie.”

Another white lie wouldn’t hurt; “You’re right, I was not at the park. I was at the mar—“

“If you say the market, I swear I will hex you right now,” Harry whispered as he leaned toward her, his hand moving to grip his cane. Like many gentlemen, their wands were hidden away in plain sight; within a hollowed out slit inside their cane, the handle merely a decorative cap.

Hermione rolled her eyes, turning the page as she ignored his threat. “That’s rather drastic.”

“Then tell me where you were.” His fingers were twisting the head of his cane off in slow, deliberate motions.

She still didn’t bite. “What does it matter?”

“You’ve been absent from the functions this past week and the Season is not even halfway done. You should be there, to make an appearance at the bare minimum.” Harry pointed out, eyes narrowing on her.

She glanced at him from beneath her lashes; she suspected what he was driving at. Perhaps he had an inkling, a suspicion, and was merely trying to find the answer.

“*And?* You know I do not like them.”

Hermione also had no reason to attend the functions unless she knew that Malfoy would be in attendance. They had a premise to keep. She did not wish to be courted by anyone else—not that they were courting. It was a farce, but one she wished to keep up while she explored this new aspect of her life.

The cap of his cane came off with a subtle *pop*. “Your mama was always insistent you at least show your face at any and all events. Something has changed.”

He was not wrong. Her mother had been questioning why she had skipped the week of events in favor of merely spending time out and about with Ginny. A subject she had not yet broached. Whenever the opportunity had arisen, she had become frozen to the spot. A rather new and odd disability thing, it seemed. She was rarely without words.

“Indeed.” A turn of the page.

“Hermione.” His voice took on an edge.

Godric's beard, he was insistent.

“Harry,” her tone was light as she responded in kind.

The book was torn from her hands and he snapped it shut before setting it on the bench beside him and away from her. Which in part forced her attention to him. There was no way for her to discreetly ignore him or avoid his questions now.

“Tell me what is going on with you.”

Hermione let out an annoyed sigh; “Harry. It's been a week. I'm allowed to sit out of these silly soirées and balls. You know they are not my stroke. I rather enjoy the solitude I find when everyone else is away. And the books. I just wish to be alone to read.”

“Which is what you have for the other half of the year when the Season comes to an end,” he pointed out steadily, unyielding.

“*Still—*“

“Ronald told me everything.” Harry interrupted her bluntly.

That scheming, no secret keeping, rat-tail bastard! Hermione thought bitterly.

Last time she would trust a Weasley.

“Then it seems there are no further explanations required, no?” Hermione replied bitterly.

She had hoped that Ginny and Ron would have kept her secret for her. Not that it would have always remained a secret. She was no fool. She knew eventually the ton would find out, that there would always be gossip. She had hoped that she would have been able to control the flapping of lips and wagging of tongues, of course.

Malfoy had sworn that she would be safe, as well. Because who would question a Duke? Not many in their right mind, that was for sure. A mistress may not necessarily be an acceptable or desired position, but on the arm of Malfoy, no one would bat an eye.

“Why are you doing this?” Harry asked her quietly, giving a glance around them to assure they were indeed alone yet and would not be overheard.

“Because I do not wish to marry.” She stated simply.

“There are many alternative options for a young lady to pursue, Hermione.” He said.

She looked up at him, studying her friend. He was not wrong, but the positions were generally reserved for the untitled or the widowed. She was perhaps one of those, but it was still not an easy journey to become a Governess or the like. In the Muggle world, it was a feat much easier acquired as well. Not to mention, she sorely lacked the ability of any such frivolities as music or singing. She could tap the piano keys and strum a harp, but they both wailed as she was breaking them.

Witch or not, what she offered to the society was to marry and bear children, to continue the magical line.

“You know as well as I do that the positions I would like to acquire are difficult for one such as myself, Harry. There are expectations that must be met—“

“And becoming a—“ Harry looked around and lowered his voice, “a mistress to one of the most notorious wizards of London seemed like a grand idea? I’m not sure I follow this thought process, Hermione. He will ruin you. He will use you and cast you aside when he grows bored.”

She turned on the bench to look at her friend squarely, “He has offered me protection and income. To further my education. To—“

“Sleep with him, correct? That’s part of the terms, is it not?”

Hermione was quiet as she briefly closed her eyes, “You know what a mistress is as well as I do, Harry.”

Her friend observed her in silence now, looking away. His jaw clenched as his dark brows drew together. “Has he touched you already then? Is it done?”

She felt her face growing warm from his blunt question. One he truly had no right to ask; “Well— no. Not that it is any business of yours, Harry. Now, my book. Please.”

For a moment she thought he had not heard her, perhaps choosing to ignore her demand. But then he turned to pick up her book from beside him and held it out to her. She reached for it

and he lifted it just out of her grasp and nearly let out a sigh of exasperation, but his expression halted her. He looked torn, perhaps hurt.

“Why wouldn’t you have come to one of us, Hermione? I don’t understand why you would wish to ruin everything your parents have worked so hard for you to have and just throw it away.” He slowly released the book to her before rising to his feet. His fingers wrapped around his cane as he looked down at her. “I know you think I have no right to worry, that I have no place to voice my concern. But I am your friend, above all else. I see the world as you do not because of my station— as much as that irks you. But I see that you are treading a thin line right now. If you are not careful, if you take one wrong step, you will be ruined. And becoming a mistress— there is no coming back from that. If this is the path you chose, understand that you will walk this for the rest of your life.”

~*~

The invitation arrived that afternoon.

A handsome letter, written on a heavy card stock and embossed in silver. Breaking the recognizable Malfoy seal, Hermione unfolded the parchment. It was an invitation to a grand escape to the Wiltshire residence. His mother, it seemed, was hosting an elaborate soirée that would last the weekend.

Three days of festivities, feasting and grandeur at one of the oldest estates in the countryside of the United Kingdom.

Her mother was quick to snatch the letter from her fingers, her dark eyes wide and lips moving as she read the letter.

“You must go, of course,” her mother stated firmly as she looked up at her daughter, “the Duke is clearly intent on continuing his courtship with you and this is an ideal situation for such a thing.”

Hermione said nothing; her thoughts jumped between making a jest about how it would indeed be an advantageous event for both of them, but it was not for their false courtship. Being away in the countryside at his own home offered them many opportunities to explore their new arrangement under the guise of a courtship.

She rolled her eyes in false chagrin; “But of course, Mama. How could I refuse the offer from the Duke?”

“You are quite right, Hermione. I’m glad you are coming about to your senses and getting your head out of the books for once.”

“Mother, I thought you were accepting of my will for knowledge and freedom?”

“I am, dearest. I am. But one must secure your future before indulging you any further. Your father and I can only provide you so much.” Her mother’s expression softened a little, “And you deserve more than what is. The Duke—he can give you everything we cannot.”

Hermione looked at her mother, wondering and curious at her words. They touched her, truly they did. That her mother still supported her silly hobbies and dalliances with her education. But yet, she remained level headed and steadfast in her desire to see her daughter wed. She felt a pang at the fact that she was merely pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes, that she had no intent to wed the Duke. That what they were in public was nowhere near what they were—or would be—in private. He offered her some things, yes. But not the safety of marriage. Nor the prospect of children, as was expected of any Duchess.

Because Hermione would never be his duchess.

“Of course you are correct, Mama. As you always are,” Hermione stated simply to appease her mother. Perhaps she would not tell her mother as of yet of their true intentions, of what she hoped to gain from this alliance with Malfoy.

“I will make the arrangements to have the carriage brought around and you shall go pack, yes? We can leave this afternoon and arrive at the Wiltshire estate by supper. Should we harness the steeds or the thestrals?” Her mother was already pacing away from her, clearly speaking aloud to herself and not her daughter. It still warmed her heart that her mother had embraced her daughter’s magical community so readily, despite the fact that she would never be a part of it herself.

The thestrals had been gifts to Hermione upon her eleventh birthday when she had first had gained a tutor to continue her magical education, alongside the standard expected teachings of musical, managerial and practical. How her parents had acquired them was beyond her, as one had to venture into the magical underbelly of London to purchase such magical beasts.

Magical creatures that Hermione, while she did treasure them as much as she did the horses, still found it rather intimidating to ride about in a saddle. A carriage, or even on foot, was a much preferable mode of transportation for her.

A broomstick was the least desired of the methods; she had witnessed the things in action when she had been taken to Diagon Alley to acquire her wand, and she had felt her stomach turning in knots at the very sight of the damned things.

Heights were terrifying for her and she would just rather keep her feet planted firmly and safe upon the earth.

As soon as her mother had cleared the foyer, Hermione bounded up the stairs with the grace of a gazelle and the delicacy of a goat. With no one to watch her, she let her usual decorum slide. Bare feet whispered across wooden floors, skirts pulled to her shins and exposed her ankles. Shoulders dropping, hair falling loose and unkept.

Once in her room, she tossed the invitation onto the bedside table before moving to her wardrobe. She would need to find appropriate clothing for the weekend; many members of

the high society of London changed their clothing several times throughout the day, depending upon the event.

Surely, this would be no exception. Breakfast, luncheons, afternoon tea and supper were considered separate events from dances and games. Would there be riding? Should she perhaps pack her boots and hats? She may not be fond of the layers upon layers of skirts, but she now had an interest in something more than stowing away in the library.

Now she wished to play a daring game with the Duke.

To entice him. To tease. To taunt.

To indulge her curiosity and take the next step into their arrangement.

Hermione was ready and eager to learn first hand what she had read in that book he had given her. She wanted to know what it felt like to quiver from a man's touch. To hear the sounds that made her body warm. To feel wanted, desired. She burned in a way she had never thought possible and this event was surely his invitation to take that next step.

“It might just be wise to pack a trunk,” Hermione muttered to herself as she began to pull gown after gown out, slippers and shoes. She loathed the frivolous hats of modern fashion but she had been reading in books of ways to flirt with a man. The way to flutter a fan. To discreetly touch a man, exhibiting intent for more. How to lure one in for a kiss.

This weekend would be the moment she decided to become a woman, and no longer be the simple, brooding and unnoticed wallflower. She wanted to see if she could bring the Duke to his knees with his desire for her.

Into The Manor

The Malfoy Manor was situated in the rolling hills of the lovely countryside of Wiltshire—the namesake of the Duke's title—and the ancestral estate itself was impressive. It was stately, square, uniquely designed in the architectural renaissance prodigy style. The mansion itself was symmetrical, towering above them at three stories with four massive square turrets equally distanced at the corners. The windows were aplenty, the glass shining in the sun and glinting at her as the carriage rolled up the impressive gravel drive.

The grand wrought iron gates were open, allowing guests to travel up to the massive front doors on their own. She felt the wards shifting around them as they passed through the gates, allowing them entry onto the property. Hermione swore she had felt the faint hum of magic miles back, perhaps at the very far reaches of the Malfoy land. Perhaps an early warning system in place to warn the occupants of the manor of incoming guests, unwanted or otherwise.

Everything about the manor was immense and screamed of opulence and wealth. An impressively extravagance only the few elite had. Having a Dukedom was nearly considered royalty.

No wonder Malfoy's head was so thick, she thought with amusement; it was filled with so much hot air that she could brew a potion from the sheer volume of it.

The rolling landscape was meticulously maintained, with a clipped lawn that lined with shaped rows of hedges of trimmed flowering bushes. Even now, Hermione could see house elves and staff members dotted about the gardens, sheers and tools in hand as they took care of the gardens.

It was incredibly beautiful.

As one would expect from a wealthy Pureblood family.

It made Hermione question herself and what she was doing; she was not a part of this world, nor would she ever be. She had not grown up in this kind of wealth. She still did not have it. It was unlikely she would ever obtain it. Marriage was a prison in more ways than one. But, by becoming a duke's mistress, it would offer her financial freedom and autonomy that she normally would not be able to find on her own.

Wouldn't it?

“You look nervous, my dear.” Her mothers voice cut through her thoughts and she felt her hand closing over hers.

Hermione shook her head, ignoring the fact that her pulse had picked up its pace with each motion of the carriage that brought them closer and closer to the Duke's home. They had been alone, true. But this? *This* was going to be different. They would be using this opportunity to

announce their false courtship and successfully close off any further advances from suitors or debutantes, while simultaneously getting to work on their relationship behind the scenes.

No, not a relationship. *Arrangement* . It was much easier to think of it that way.

“Just a bit of motion sickness, mama.” She explained quietly.

Gathering her books from beside her on the bench, she situated them in her lap as the carriage slowed and eventually rolled a halt before the sweeping palatial doors.

A footman descended the marble stairs to open their door for them, another setting a wooden footstool down in the gravel for their descent. She took the hand that was offered, books clutched to her chest with her other arm.

Her eyes swept the grounds around them as she stepped down, releasing the footmans’ hand as she waited for her mother to join her. The pair of thestrals pulling their carriage pranced within their harness, eager to be on their way and moving again. They were quiet but fidgety beasts; thus Hermione’s reluctance to ever ride one. She could barely manage the dancing of a standard horse beneath her rear, but one of these? She would surely end up on the ground.

No other carriages lined the drive or awaited footman, indicating that they were the first to arrive. But of course they were; it had been noted in the letter they were to be the first and invited as such. Something about Narcissa requesting a quiet luncheon with them due to her son's sudden interest in her.

Delightful .

Nothing like meeting a duchess, someone who would likely be criticizing everything about Hermione. Her posture, her prose, her bloody hobbies and interests. Hermione was sure to fumble her way talking to the duchess regent, known for her cool demeanor and legendary beauty and grace.

Not concerning at all.

This was a farce. Her pulse started to become erratic as a subtle panic chewed at the edges of her mind.

Narcissa would see through their scheme—

Her mother interrupted her chaotic thoughts. “You still look a bit peaked. Would you like a short respite? I’m sure the Duke would be fine if we took a later luncheon”

“No, I’m fine, mother,” she insisted firmly, shaking her head to clear her mind.

Her hands trembled as she smoothed one across her brow, as if to wipe away the lingering doubts. She hated to fib but this was a white lie, correct? Nothing wrong with that. No harm, no foul. It would appear they were engaged to be wed, while the only ones to know the true intent of their arrangement were the two of them. And her meddling friends. So long as those blundering fools kept their lips shut, who was truly going to be harmed by their decision to form this arrangement? They were two consenting adults, after all. Her reputation might be

tarnished if it became known that she was Malfoy's mistress, but at that point, the opinion of society would not matter to her. She would have gained what she wished for most; independence and freedom from marriage.

Perhaps she wanted it more for herself than anything.

And there was nothing wrong with Hermione being selfish for *once* in her life.

She deserved happiness, even if it was won with cunning and deceit.

Oh dear.

The doors slid open as she settled a foot on the lowest step, as if some ancient magic imbued into the very foundation of the mansion welcomed her. Her mother was beaming as she looked around, every bit of magic some form of enhancement to her. They entered the foyer, a massive towering space flanked by two sets of staircases. Massive chandeliers hung overhead, the candles unlit as light spilled into the space through the windows. The floor was a marble tile, polished so bright that she could just make out their reflection in it. The walls here were minimally decorated, as they were elaborate in and of themselves with hand carved wainscoting and trim.

"Ahh, Madam Granger! Miss Granger!" A lyrical voice sounded and they were greeted by a witch Hermione had never met, but one she had no doubt who it was.

The reigning Duchess of Wiltshire, perfectly poised and proper, Narcissa Malfoy, glided effortlessly towards them. Her gown was demure, fit for a matron of her age. Perfectly tailored in rich hues of black and green, made from the finest of fabrics. Her hair was coiffed into tight curls atop her head, not a stray strand out of place. Her face was oval shaped, her skin fair and proper as to be expected of a lady of her station. Her eyes—Hermione instantly knew whom Malfoy had inherited his eyes from.

"Ahh, you must be Lady Wiltshire?" Her mother asked in her most polite tone, her smile genuine, albeit a bit strained.

While they were considered a genteel family, her parents foray into this realm was a bit... rough. They were unaccustomed to many of the formalities and traditions, and Hermione knew her mother felt at odds much of the time.

Even though Hermione rather loathed the entire ordeal herself, she had to appreciate the efforts her mother put in, for her sake.

She felt a pang of shame, knowing what she intended to do.

Lady Wiltshire- for that was what Hermione would refer to her in her mind- continued to favor them with that unwavering and practiced smile.

"That would be correct. But you may call me Narcissa. My son informed me of your imminent arrival. As our primary guests, we have made up the guest suites for you, separate from the other guest wing."

How many wings could there be?

Lady Wiltshire looked past them as two sets of footmen carried their trunks into the foyer, halting as they waited for instructions. The matron witch turned to speak to them directly, her words hushed but clear with direction to carry their items to their rooms and they hurried off towards the stairs, disappearing up one floor and then another.

“You must be weary after your journey... Would you like a short respite? I have a lovely brunch set up in my drawing room for us whenever you are ready,” Lady Wiltshire explained in that same even tone.

“Will His Grace be joining us?” Hermione asked.

The other witches' expression remained neutral, nary giving anything away or revealing her thoughts. Her hands folded before her as she leveled steel grey eyes on her, her gaze steady and unwavering.

“Draco is on a ride with the Viscount, and will be joining us later for tea.”

Ah.

No, Hermione was not disappointed over that fact. She didn't care, did she? Yes, she was invited to the manor by the Duke himself, but that did not mean anything. Any sense of excitement she felt at the thought of seeing him was for the simple fact she enjoyed his company.

How unfortunate.

Wrong, she enjoyed what he *offered* her.

She would be fine having a simple brunch with the duchess, just small talk and nothing more.

~*~

The brunch with the elder witch Malfoy went by without a hitch. If anything, it was almost painfully polite. Without having conversed with the Duke prior, Hermione wondered if they should have planned this a bit ahead. Surprisingly, the former duchess seemed to have no direct questions as to Hermione's intentions with her son. There were no surprise questions, nor was she ever blindsided with anything uncomfortable.

Perhaps he had already spoken to her, or expressed his wishes that things remain civil.

Narcissa Malfoy did remind Hermione of someone who would need everything answered and discussed, in great detail, when it came to her son and her family. Undoubtedly, news had already reached the matron that her son had called on Hermione. It was nearly unfathomable that the witch had not put two and two together that they were courting; though whether or

not she was privy to the fact that it was not a real potential engagement between Malfoy and herself was still a question to Hermione.

She had no idea the relationship the wizard had with his mother, or just what he would tell her.

Because how did the rake suddenly come to choose to court a witch; and one such as herself, no less?

When there were many other, *better*, choices to be had. Ones with wealthy families, connections to titles and various stations in life.

And yet, for some *unfathomable* reason, the Duke of Wiltshire had settled for the wallflower and bookworm that was Hermione Granger.

A Muggleborn, untitled witch with only a paltry dowry to be offered to any prospective suitors.

Most of the other guests were arriving or had arrived just after lunch, the halls and corridors bustling with footmen and servants as trunks and luggage was brought into the manor. Hermione had hoped that she would be able to stow away with the Duke before everyone else arrived and vied for his attention, but it seemed that would not be the case.

In avoidance of all the commotion, Hermione took to exploring the manor house, discovering, fortunately for her, that she and her mother's chambers were just a short hustle down the hall from the Duke's bedchambers. Rather convenient, that. Perhaps planned by Malfoy, perhaps a happy accident. Neither of which Hermione was about to complain about.

In the end, it mattered not how it had occurred.

But she found herself rather looking forward to the end of the evening festivities. An entire weekend trapped in the manor, surrounded by London's elite, was hardly something she considered to be amusing or worthwhile. There were many things she would rather be doing, none of which included prancing about a ballroom or making small talk.

Dinner was served half past seven, after most of the other guests had arrived. The dining hall was massive, heavily draped in rich fabrics and elaborate wallpapers. A massive and merry fireplace roared at one end, candles bobbing in the chandeliers above and the table had been charmed to a mind boggling length to accommodate all the bodies that filled the space.

At the head of the table sat Narcissa, elegant and poised. The chair beside her was empty, presumably for her husband, Lucius Malfoy. Hermione had taken some time to inquire about the Malfoy's as soon as he had sprung the question of becoming his mistress, learning that his father had passed recently due to a sudden onslaught of consumption; even with potions and the wealth to have healers at his beck and call, the former Duke had been unable to overcome the illness and its severity. Hermione had spied the living portrait of the recently deceased Lucius in the hall near his study— now his son's study— and had studiously avoided its piercing grey eyes.

They were seated close to the duchess regent, further down the table. Beside his mother, Malfoy seemed unbothered. Though, eligible witches of higher stations than Hermione had been situated strategically and conveniently placed within conversational range to the Duke.

A maneuver done by his mother, or by the demands of society?

The Greengrass sisters, Parkinson, Lovegood and a few others were dithering on about various topics that seemed of little interest to the Duke, although the Viscount seemed quite taken and enthralled by Lovegood. They were talking amicably amongst themselves and the Duke leaned back in his chair, long fingers wrapped about the stem of his wine glass. Hooded silver eyes roved amongst the guests along the table, his head tipped as he occasionally responded with a noncommittal agreement or response.

But Hermione felt his gaze lingering on her a touch longer than anyone else, playing across her face before it would slip away. Not enough to raise suspicions, but *she* had noticed it. How could she not? It sent her pulse racing like a galloping centaur. A mix of ire for his sheer boldness and perhaps a touch of excitement.

Most eligible witches were strategically arranged to be seated beside an eligible wizard; so on one side of Hermione sat Ronald, the other was her rather anxious nobleman, Lord Neville Longbottom. She had met him in passing over the years; he was a rather quiet fellow, similar to her in the way he preferred to be unnoticed. While she would scurry off to the library, Neville would escape to the gardens. They made small talk to pass the supper.

Hermione was keenly aware that her friends across from her, Ginny and Harry, had picked up on the subtle exchange of glances between herself and the Duke.

Her dress suddenly felt constrictive, her body growing warm under Malfoy's attention. Hermione felt flushed, her fingers clenching around the handle of the fork. She had not touched her meal except to push the food about the plate absently.

A mere distraction, really.

She had spent much of her time as a debutant actively *avoiding* such attention from available suitors. She enjoyed her privacy, her *peace*. But yet...

Gracious, the Duke had an effect on her that none had before.

He annoyed her to no end, even as they began to enter into their arrangement. He continually bickered with her and awakened her ire.

The Duke was a pretentious *prick* in every sense of the word, and yet—

She felt like a dunderhead beneath his gaze, his attention. Was this the effect he had on all young maidens?

Swallowing a mouthful of her wine as she glanced towards him, she watched the way his lips lifted into that subtle cocky smirk of his—the one that irritated her as much as it seemed to

draw her in. Hermione would love to wipe it right off his stupid face— with her hand or her mouth.

Taking another deep drink of her glass, she quickly tried to douse her traitorous thoughts.

How that man had managed to slip beneath her shield baffled her.

But the way he looked at her sent a shiver through her entire being.

“Hermione,” Ron whispered into her ear, “you need to slow down on the drinks. We haven’t even finished the first course yet and you’ve had three.”

Hermione looked at her nearly empty glass, her mind dizzy as she processed his words. She had not realized it, but the glasses had been charmed to refill. Even now, before her eyes, the flute beneath her fingers hummed ever so slightly as the liquid rose to the brim once more.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered as she set it down hastily, “I hadn’t realized...”

Her nerves were on edge, fraught with anticipation of what she knew was going to occur. She was eager, yes, but... she had read more of the book Malfoy had given her, needing to know what was going to happen between them. It didn't seem possible, frankly, it shouldn't be possible. If she were honest with herself, she had no idea *that such a thing* even occurred between a man and a woman. What she had witnessed on farms had been... so brutal, almost. Rough.

And yet, everything she had experienced so far with the wizard had been entirely the opposite. Soft, wandering hands. Teasing touches. Heated kisses that nearly caused her to melt into a puddle at his feet.

“You look flushed, are you ill?” Ron asked, a frown touching his face as he looked at her with concern.

“What? No—“ she shook her head quickly, causing her plate to blur before her momentarily. “I’m fine. It’s just... There are a lot of people here, that’s all.”

He let out a slight chuckle, “I’m sure you can sneak off to the library once the meal has ended and no one would notice.” He paused, his eyes skimming along the table to halt pointedly on the Duke, “except one.” Ron leaned in closer, “I know you do not wish to talk about that, but I worry for you. He has a reputation...”

“Now is *not* the time to show your concern for me.”

“I haven’t seen you in over a week, you haven’t been home to visit, the only time any of us have seen you is when you are slinking home in the wee hours of the morning,” Ron whispered hurriedly, ignoring her icy glare. “Hermione. Please. You need to talk to us. At least one of us.”

“Well, that certainly won’t be *you*,” she huffed as she reached for her wine once more, halting herself before she snagged it. It was dangerous to imbibe too much so early in the evening. Especially when one had *plans* with a certain distinguished gentleman.

“Fine, it does not have to be me, but *someone* . Ginny, perhaps—“ he was gesturing across the table to his sister, the red head engaged deep into conversation with Harry.

Hermione cut him off, “Absolutely not. She cannot keep a secret to save her life. Nor can *you* . You Weasley’s are the bane of my existence, I swear. A house elf keeps gossip to themselves better than either of you.”

Ron flushed, the tips of his ears turning a shade similar to his hair. “It was *one time* —“

“The most important time to keep your trap *shut* . Useless, the lot of you.”

“Well, that’s a tad harsh,” Ron mumbled as pushed some peas about his plate.

“The *truth* hurts sometimes, Ronald.” Hermione set her fork down with a clatter and turned to Neville, “if you’ll excuse me, My Lord.” She rose to her feet in a fluid motion— with far more grace than she usually perceived herself to have— and left the table.

~*~

Within a short time after the meal had drawn to a close, the dance hall was a bustle of activity and festivities. The air was filled with excitement, enchantment, and gossip— it all running abuzz as people gathered and greeted each other.

As usual, one found Draco slinking away from his own company to find solitude.

And something more, this time.

He was searching for Hermione, and he knew just where to find her.

Not amidst the crush of guests, for sure. Nor with her own friends. No, she would be in search of solitude, just as he was. And perhaps that was the initial reason he had been drawn to her those moons ago. Because even though the game had changed, neither of them had. Their expectations had not shifted. He would almost be disappointed if she had suddenly become like the others, if she abandoned who she was for him.

No, he rather admired the withdrawn bookworm.

The corridors of Malfoy Manor were expansive and winding, carrying the sound of the ball throughout the building as if it were a cavern.

His steps eventually led him to what he sought; the exquisite Malfoy library. While most of the chambers were open to the guests to explore, many in attendance did not venture this far, nor have much interest in the antiquities and historical value of the library. It was a massive

space, lined with wide rows of bookcases, and each shelf filled with rows upon rows of books. It offered privacy due to the fact that many might not wander here.

Slipping through the double doors and into the chamber, he found the room already lit. It was charmed to do so upon having someone in admittance, so it was his first indication that Hermione was indeed here.

Quietly shutting the door behind him, a wave of his hand over the handle slipped the lock into place. A small privacy, anyone could unlock it with a whispered *alohomora*.

“Ms. Granger?” Draco whispered into the silence, opting for discretion to start.

It would do little good to ruin their game before it had just begun. They would begin the next step of their arrangement soon enough. She appeared from down one of the aisles, an open book balanced in her palm, her wand tucked just behind her ear and tip lit, casting her in a glorious hazy glow. Her brown eyes swept up to his face.

“Your Grace,” she greeted him.

For the briefest of moments, a smile touched her lips and Draco was lost in time, wondering what could be if they had met under different circumstances, in a different life. One without silly expectations or restrictions. He could almost imagine Hermione in this library, coming to find her here, perhaps a child propped on her hip and— he shook his head sharply.

No, neither of them wanted children, he reminded himself sternly. Neither of them wanted to marry. This was why they had the arrangement they did. This is why they were going to enter a non-committed relationship.

“Are we alone?” Draco asked quietly as she prowled towards him, her growing independence and audaciousness sending an excited whisper through his body. She slowly closed the book as she neared him, a catlike smirk curling her lips.

Oh, how he truly loved how comfortable she had become, even in her inexperience. So eager to learn, to explore, to expand her knowledge.

With him.

“Indeed we are,” she replied.

She reached a hand up to her wand, the light distinguishing at her touch as she flicked it effortless. The curtains fell free of their stays, swinging shut. Another wave, and she cast a *muffliato* about them, giving them the privacy they needed from prying ears.

“Let us move onto the next lesson,” Hermione said as she reached him, holding the book out to him.

It was the book he had first given her.

The First Lesson

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone had a lovely holiday!

Enchanted Readers;

The ancestral home of one of the most notorious families of our society is open for a host of activities that should last a few days.

*Dinners and dances, games and gambling; What an exciting time this should be!
And it should be the rife of much scandal and gossip for the hungry members of the ton. With
hundreds of rooms, what better a place to slip away and lose oneself?
I must admit, this observant member of society is ever eager to see what debauchery
happens this weekend at the Wiltshire Estate.*

Remember,

I am your ever watchful set of eyes.

The Lady Quibbler

~*~

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach as she watched the Duke take the book from her, turning it over in his hands. He was quiet, a faint smirk touching his lips. He cocked a brow in her direction as his head tipped, the overhead chandeliers illuminating him in a soft warm light that played across the planes of his face. Malfoy looked sharp in his perfectly tailored clothing, his waistcoat tucked close to his lean waist. He wore another elegant silk cravat, this one of a flattering viridian green, but that made her wish to wrinkle it between her fingers all the more. Because *oh* how she loved to ruffle his perfect and unflappable appearance.

Long, ringed fingers ran along the spine of the book and he let it fall open in his hand. His eyes skimmed the words on the pages before him, the corners of his lips twitching in a beguiling way and his dark brow arching slightly.

“You’ve been doing some reading, Miss Granger,” he said quietly, that smirk growing even wider. Like a cat with a prized catch, he looked up at her. Studied her, his silver eyes dancing

along her face to come to rest briefly on her lips.

Hermione tried to quell the ridiculous fluttering of her nerves; she had both a gnawing curiosity and mild trepidation to what she had seen depicted in the book he held in his hands. So far, she had been pleasantly pleased with the less intimate activities they had engaged in, such as kissing. It had been harmless, really. A test to see if she truly wished to move onto the next level of their arrangement. One that could, and ultimately would, ruin her for any other marriage prospects.

Instead, she let her mask slip into place as she folded her hands neatly in front of her, resisting the urge to shift her feet; “Indeed I have been.”

Malfoy turned the pages slowly, but his eyes never left her face. And that infuriatingly attractive smirk remained. “Anything in particular that piqued your interest?”

Heat crawled up along her chest and neck, and Hermione felt her cheeks growing warm under his gaze. “A few things.”

Many of them , you mean ? The voice chimed in her head.

“Well,” Malfoy shut the book quietly, “I am a patient man. We can explore whatever it is you would like to experience and stop as you see fit.”

Her pulse leapt at the invitation.

At the promise.

Because *this* was what she had been waiting for, right? The entire purpose of their charade. Her way to freedom and self autonomy. Exploring her own mind and body with the rake-who had the experience necessary to coax her into what pleasure awaited her with as little discomfort as possible- was everything she could dream of.

Or, what she could imagine with her own mind, that is. Her lack of experience was a hindrance and she craved the knowledge and experience. And while the Duke did still annoy her with his pompous attitude, there was this darker allure about him. Something forbidden.

The book, while mostly speaking of people who had experience, mentioned the likelihood of maidens experiencing discomfort or pain during their first couple, which may happen the first few times.

To say she wasn’t both excited and terrified was an understatement. Even as her body hummed with a yearning for the unknown, a primal need, her stomach twisted in knots and tumbled over. The only reason she managed to hide that anxious energy was because she had linked her fingers together in front of her to stop them from trembling. Her toes wiggled within their slippers as a way to relieve some of that anxiety.

The Duke stepped towards her with a smooth grace, one hand coming out to trace his fingertips along her waist. His touch was gentle but sure, coming to rest on her lower back as he tugged her forward towards him.

Kissing him wasn't a new experience, she had grown used to this. The feel of his chest against her, the way she nestled right into the shape of him, the feel of his arm around her, so warm and calming. The Duke lowered his head, his lips brushing against hers in a way that sent an electrical charge through her body. He was guiding her backwards until the back of her knees bumped into one of the settees that were stationed about the library, guiding her down onto the chair.

Hermione felt the air rush from her lungs as her bottom connected with the seat, looking up at Malfoy curiously, trying to figure out what he intended. His hand came up to catch her chin briefly, his thumb teasing along the curve of her lower lip as he peered down at her.

"Lay back, Princess," he said huskily, "keep your legs over the edge for me."

She swallowed a little as she shifted her rear further onto the cushions, leaning back as he waited for her to move into position. He set the book on the seat beside her, bending at the waist to catch her lips against his in a heated kiss. She felt his hands coming to rest upon her upper legs, his thumbs stroking downward along the curve of her thighs, pushing against her skirts. He lowered himself to his knees before her, using his own shoulders to nudge her knees apart. Hermione started to sit upright as she felt his fingers skimming along her ankles, lifting her skirts.

"Shh," he said soothingly as his hand stilled at the back of her calf. His palm was warm through her stocking. She had never been touched here before, and suddenly her nerves were alight. "We won't do anything you aren't comfortable with," he reminded her gently. He waited for her.

Hermione steadied her nerves as she tried to relax back into the settee, her hands coming to rest against the cushions. She was fascinated, she hated to admit, over the fact that the Duke was kneeling before her, his eyes burning into her like molten steel. His fingers skimmed higher, teasing her skin with his touch. The air of the library was cool against her skin as her skirts were lifted higher.

~*~

Draco *knew* what was entailed in Hermione being his mistress. There was no dancing about the fact that they had agreed to this arrangement of intimacy. But he had never felt so bloody eager to be with a witch before.

His heart was racing at her boldness, at her excitement and tenacity.

And over the fact she, the Lady Hermione Granger herself, trusted him enough with her virginity. It was not something he took lightly, even as it pertained to the situation. To him, it was a gift. One normally reserved for a first love or husband, but it was gifted to *him*. It sent his heart pounding against his ribs and blood rushing to his head in excitement. He had never been with a witch like this, had never been their first. In fact, he had lost his own innocence

to a maid at the tender age of fourteen. Clumsy, inexperienced, fumbling lad. Draco had learned a lot in his years since then, honed them. Not that he wished to brag, especially not to her.

No matter how eager Hermione was, he knew he could not take her innocence in the library. Perhaps one day he might pin her to a shelf, but today was not that day.

It was callous.

She may be a bit of a brat, but she deserved to be bedded right. To be caressed, cherished, to experience all that this arrangement could offer her. He wanted her begging for more, not thinking about any pain or discomfort she may experience.

His thumbs traced the curve of her ankle, feeling the fullness of her calf against his palm as his hand roamed higher. Her skirts were now at her knees, her slippered feet resting on the floor beside his legs and her stockings a lovely shade of pale hyacinth. His eyes followed the curve of her knee, tracing along her skirts to briefly dance up to her face. Hermione raptly watched him, her lips parted just ever so slightly. Her pupils were wide in the low light, a wayward curl teasing the side of her cheek. She looked utterly ravished and he had barely touched her. Heat immediately went to his groin and he felt himself growing hard within his trousers. Draco could hardly wait to have her unraveling in pleasure beneath him.

Letting his hand still its journey, he caressed her knee in a slow circle. His voice was a murmur, "is this alright?"

She nodded her head, just barely.

His other hand now came to rest on her other leg, both working in tandem to inch their way along the peak towards the curve of her thighs. The soft fabric of her stockings gave way to skin, which was heated beneath the pads of his fingers as they skimmed ever slowly upward along her legs. Her skirts were now gathered around her waist, falling in waves around her and shielding her just enough from him that she was still *decent*, for the lack of a better word.

With his hands grazing along the hips, Draco pushed her skirts up higher as he inched his upper body further between her knees. Her heat teased his cheeks as he settled there, her faint scent tickling his nose with her sweet heady aroma.

Draco was dying to taste her, his mouth practically watering at the thought of her essence, and that *he* would be the first to ever press his lips to her sweetest part.

A faint flush had crept across her cheeks, and Hermione worried her bottom lip between her teeth. He could tell she was anxious, embarrassed even, but whatever shyness she had was long gone.

"Have you touched yourself at all?" Draco asked in a low murmur, his hot breath fanning across her sensitive skin. His thumbs kept caressing the dip of her hips, the junction between her thighs and waist.

Her lashes fluttered slightly, briefly concealing her thoughts from him.

“No,” she finally confessed.

“Mmm,” he purred as shifted closer, “so I’ll be the first then.”

Before she could respond, he pressed a kiss to the top of her mound, just above the neat thatch of dark hair that shielded her most intimate parts from him. He had been with women before who had not trimmed this; he was unsure if this was just a casual upkeep on her part or something she had decided to take upon herself after reading the book. Either way, Draco didn’t mind nor did he care. He felt her hips shift slightly as he pressed another kiss lower, just above the bud he desperately sought.

Shifting his arms to come beneath her thighs, hands slipping over them, he pulled her to the edge of the settee until her arse just hung over the edge. This time he placed an almost ridiculously chaste kiss to her sensitive bud, hearing a shaky little intake of breath from above him.

With his shoulders holding her knees apart, her sweet little pink center was open for him, glistening with moisture. He delved his tongue along her folds, tracing them ever so gently as he felt a slight shudder through her thighs pressed into his shoulders.

Hermione asked no questions, but he could feel her shifting, adjusting as his tongue pressed against her very core. He lapped at her sweet nectar, his grip on her thighs tightening as he became hungrier for her. She was trembling with each pass of his tongue around her tight pink bud, and he finally gave her what she so desperately craved. His lips settled around her clit, his tongue circling it in a steady motion. Her hips jolted upright, pressing her against his mouth as a surprised moan was torn from her throat.

Taking it as her approval, Draco alternated between caressing and suckling at her clit, moving a hand to slip a finger through her slick folds. Her hips were canting in time to his motion now, and he pressed a finger into her core.

She was quiet, nearly silent in her sudden arousal and need. Her moans were mere whispers in the silence of the library. Breathy little pants. Her hands were clenched into fists in her skirts beside her on the bench, and had he taken the time to look, Draco would see a slight sheen growing along her skin. But he could not break away from her divine little core, only easing his finger into the second knuckle.

Circe , she was unbelievably tight around him.

Her walls gripped at his digit, and each lift of her hips and writhing motion pushed it deeper. Draco worked his finger fully into her warmth, teasing and stroking her walls in time to her movements, hearing her pants growing erratic with broken words. Hermione was pushing against his mouth, pulling away, overcome with a high of emotions as she rode out the first wave of pleasure. He felt the moment it crashed over her, her thighs clenching tight to his shoulders, muscles quivering and her walls fluttered about his finger erratically.

Draco eased his finger out of her, lifting it to his lips as he settled back on his knees. He slipped it into his mouth, letting out a little moan of delight at the taste of her on his tongue. He admired her, sprawled before him. A delicate flower, ripe and dripping her sweet nectar.

Despite how much he wished to take her right there, Draco instead reached forward to ease her skirts from her hands and pull them over her legs. He rested his palms briefly against her knees, feeling the slight trembling of her muscles beneath his fingertips.

Hermione sat up slowly, her pupils so wide the honey whiskey brown he so admired was all but gone. Her lips were parted, her little pink tongue darting out to wet them.

“Malfoy—“ she started and she leaned forward to kiss him suddenly, one arm around his neck and her other hand gripping his lapel. He knew she tasted herself when her tongue swept into his mouth with a wanton abandon. He reveled in it, in her.

The sound of footsteps and a door opening brought them harshly to reality; “and over here is the library—“

Draco lurched back from Hermione hastily, putting as much space between them as he could as he sprang to his feet, hoping he was not too late in his reaction.

~*~

Only Moments Earlier

Theo stepped out of the alcove, straightening his ruffled cravat and then smoothing his fingers through his wavy hair. A satisfied smirk touched his lips as he left his companion behind to readjust themselves. Turning the cuff links on his sleeves idly, he walked down one of the corridors of the mansion to return to the ballroom and rejoin the festivities. But he paused as he spied another wanderer.

Creeping up on the unsuspecting witch, Theo came up just behind the redheaded she-Weasley as she peered through a crack in a side door.

“What or whom are we spying on?” He whispered into her ear.

He barely dodged a widely flung hand, feeling the air from it causing his hair to shift beside his ear.

“Oh, bloody hell!” Ginny hissed at him as she turned to face him, her eyes narrowed in a glare. “My Lord, whyever would you sneak up on someone like that? What if I had my wand on me and *hexed* you?”

He let out a chuckle as he stepped to the side, leaning his shoulder against the wall. He gestured to the crack, “again, I ask; who are we spying on?”

The sound of a slippered toe tapping on the ground amused him to no end. Her arms had folded across her chest as she lifted her chin; “first, why are you *here* and not *there*?”

There, he presumed, meant the ballroom.

“I was enjoying some quality time,” Theo replied simply, looking at his nails in feigned boredom. “How about you? Why are *you* here? Apparently *spying* like some little house elf.”

Ginny scoffed as she dropped her arms away from her bosom, “I’m looking for my friend. She up and left me with my brother and friend and I rather prefer her company to theirs. I swear if I have to hear Ronald droning on about Lovegood’s ankles for another moment—“

“Granger?” He asked with a raised brow.

“Yes, how did you guess?”

He lifted a narrow shoulder in a shrug, “from my recollection, she has few friends and you happen to be one. And, if memory serves me correctly, you two are two peas in a pod.”

There was an eye-roll at his statement, “and who was your distraction?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he replied lightly, not even remotely surprised she had understood his meaning. The witch had several brothers, after all. It was likely she was fully aware of what transpired between couples. “I am now looking for Granger as well, it seems.”

“Delightful,” Ginny muttered as she shifted to gesture at the crack, “in there.”

Catching her meaning, Theo turned to peer through the slit in the doorway. A subtle breeze teased his eyelashes as he let his eye adjust to the dim light beyond; he knew the room, of course. He had grown up and spent much of his time here as a child. The infamous Malfoy library sat just beyond this service door. But it was silent, oddly so. Charmed, he realized. Not quite warded but enough that anyone eavesdropping would have no clue whom was beyond the doors. And the only reason to silence a room was for either something nefarious or debauched.

“You’re asshole of a friend is in there as well. I seen him slip in just a few minutes after Hermione left me,” her voice was just in his ear as she leaned close, whispering for only him to hear.

“They’re in there, together?”

“*Qui*.”

“And neither have hexed the other?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” she sounded disappointed.

Theo chuckled softly as he tipped his head to glance at her. She was watching him raptly, blue eyes bright in the low light of this part of the hallway. He made no response as he returned his attention to the library beyond, scanning what part of the room he could see. It was dimly lit, the curtains drawn. But he could see a couple of the chairs, a settee in particular. And then there, just barely hidden by the back of the chair, he saw recognizable curls and a stick of a wand standing upright. Squinting, Theo spotted his rakish friend kneeling before her, on his knees.

He let out a surprised gasp; “dear Salazar’s beard, is he—?”

He was shoved aside as Ginny pressed her face to the crack, “*Proposing?!?*”

Theo elbowed her ribs and she ducked, giving him just enough space above her head to peer through the crack once more. They were silent for a moment, her head tucked against Theo’s chest as they spied on their idiotic friends.

“Oh, no. He is definitely not proposing.” Theo amended in a delighted whisper.

He felt Ginny shifting to get a better view, her derrière pressing against his hip for a moment as she craned her head, “then what is he— *oh my*. Is he doing what I think he is doing? Oh! Blasted Hermione. She best give me all the details when this is over, or I swear I shall hex her myself.”

Footsteps could be heard coming down the hallway and she proceeded to ram her elbow into his gut, shoving him away as quickly as she could and practically bouncing off into the hallway towards the voices. Which left Theo, rubbing his abused rib cage as he leaned against the door.

“Good evening,” Ginny’s voice chimed sweetly from just a few yards away, “I seemed to have become turned around. Perhaps you can help me?”

What a little doxy.

The Mistress

Chapter Notes

I just wanted to let everyone know that I love every comment you leave and I do read them all! I just am terrible at responding 😊

“Good evening!” Ginny said loudly, making sure her voice would carry, “I seemed to have become turned around. Perhaps you can help me?”

Trying to spare her friend the scandal of being caught, Ginny managed to stall the two ladies at the library doors by slipping in front of them. She let out an obnoxious sort of laugh as she tried to buy the couple inside time— and alert them to incoming and unwanted guests and to make haste in becoming decent.

The dithering ladies seemed momentarily taken aback by Ginny’s abrupt appearance. She recognized them immediately; the diamond of the season, Pansy Parkinson and her friend, Romilda. The two were the same age as Hermione, yet they remained unwed. They were of high wealth, and their families did not deem most suitors worthy of their lovely daughters. Pansy had been absent from many of the events unless they had knowledge of who would be in attendance. In fact, they had set their caps on none other than the Marquis, Viscount and the Duke and only seemed to make an appearance in one or all of them were present.

T’would be a shame for them to find out that neither of them were interested, and one of them was currently quite occupied with someone they mostly likely deemed unworthy of someone their rank.

“The ballroom is just back that way, Ginevra,” Pansy said lightly, pointing with her fan to just over her shoulder. You truly cannot miss it.”

Ginny sidled further into the way of the door, but Romilda did not take the hint. The dark haired witch shooed Ginny aside, grabbing the handle of the library door. “Now if you will be on your way and out of ours, we wish to tour the library. After all, it is to be Pansy’s one day. She ought to see what will be hers.”

Far be it from Ginny to stop the witches.

She stepped aside, holding up a hand. “My Ladies.” She said scathingly.

They swung the door open with a harrumph, leaving Ginny to pray she had bought just enough time to spare her friend of scandal— but simultaneously wanting to spoil Pansy’s silly dreams.

Old school day rivalries died hard. The damned witch had always been tugging on her braids and changing the color of her frock— making fun of her past season gowns— in the middle of lessons.

Her ears were met with a skeptical gasp, perhaps mingled with a shocked choking sound.

“*Oh!*” Romilda’s was exclaiming, “we are so sorry to—“ there was a pregnant pause, “Your Grace. Miss Granger.”

~*~

Draco had already sprung away from Hermione at the first sound of voices outside the library; while the room had been silenced so no one could hear them, they were privy to hearing everything else. He had had just enough time to move clear away from her and dip into an aisle by the time the doors had swung open. His fingers hastily yanked a book from the shelf and propped it open against his palm.

He was perhaps a touch too close to Hermione, but not that close that it should cause an entire scandal.

Or so he had thought.

The heated and wild look in the witches eyes was enough to compete with fiendfyre. Pansy’s hands were white knuckled on her folded fan, and her companion had audibly gasped before managing to spit coherent words out.

You would think that they had stumbled in on them moments earlier; he imagined they would have simply fainted on the spot at that sight.

“Ladies,” Draco drawled as he stepped forward, not even glancing in the direction of Hermione. He needed to pretend he had no idea that she was there; she was a quick witted witch, she would figure out his game quick enough. The rustle of her skirts gathered his attention and he turned on his heel, lifting his brows in mock surprise. “And Miss Granger? How did I miss you there?”

Considering what they had been doing moments earlier and Draco could still taste her essence on his lips, she looked rather well put together already. Her cheeks were a tad flushed, but that could be dismissed with the heat of a dance from earlier, or the tightness of her gown. Not that he cared, but had she worn a boned bodice it would even be more likely she had simply felt lightheaded. Of course, Hermione wore no such contraptions so that excuse was null and void.

With her own book in her hand, she looked demure and played her cards well; a faint look of surprise seemed to cross her face, her lips parting a little as she looked at him. “Your Grace! You startled me!” She was on her feet, fixing her skirts as she snapped her own book shut and

promptly shoved it into her charmed pocket, hidden in the folds of her skirt. “I was so sure I had this space to myself.”

“Ah, there you are Hermione!” The redheaded witch seized her opportunity to swoop in and rescue her friend. “I was looking for you and ended up all turned around. I had assumed perhaps you had retired early or gone back to the ballroom...”

Ginny wasted no time in brushed past— rather, elbowing through Pansy and Romilda— to link her arm through Hermione’s. The redhead looked pointedly at Draco, a knowing smile on her face. A *devious* one. Oh, Draco wondered what she knew.

“Your Grace, do excuse us. I didn’t mean to interrupt your solitude in your own home,” Hermione muttered, tipping her head in the closest thing to a curtsy he imagined she would offer him. She spared the other two witches curt nods. “Pansy. Romilda. Do try to have a lovely evening. Though it seems the Duke is rather occupied.”

Pansy’s brown eyes narrowed slightly on Hermione’s face, as if taking in every minute detail; that wayward curl that had broke free of its hold to tease her cheek. The red blush that stained her skin. A faint sheen of sweat that caused her neck to be a touch glossy. The witch was quick witted and intelligent, easily rivaling Hermione. She was no fool and was examining the entire situation to put the pieces together.

“Rather, it seems he *was* occupied,” Pansy said in a low tone, her attention now shifting to Draco.

He held her gaze, slowly closing his book with a definitive snap.

“Occupied *reading*, Pansy. And nothing more.” Draco said in a tone that indicated both boredom but a silent demand.

Most did not like the idea of crossing a Duke; usually they wished to curry favor from one. It was clear to him that Pansy was suddenly having an internal dilemma. A battle raged inside her; accuse them of what she suspected and raise a scandal, or keep her lips sealed and stay in his good graces. Both held something for her, one more promising than the other. Draco was not blind. He knew where Pansy had set her cap and that she had been vying for his attention for some time. Most of the witches were. Who would not want to bag a Duke?

The silence was thick and poignant, like a heavy fog settling into the library. Ginny firmed her grip on Hermione’s arm and physically forced her friend to move towards the door.

“Right, well I spotted a dessert table with our name on it and I am absolutely peckish—“

“Ginny, we just ate a seven course meal—“ Hermione started, but her friend seemed oblivious as she continued chattering on, pulling them past the other two witches and into the hallway. Sparing a final glance over her shoulder at him, Hermione disappeared through the doorway and leaving him to the wolves.

“Ginevra Weasley—“ Hermione huffed as she tried to pry her friend's claws from her forearm, “unhand me this moment.”

Her friend did not, in fact, unhand her. Not until Ginny had dragged her clear down the hallway, past the ballroom down a second corridor and all the way to Hermione's chambers. It was not until the door was securely shut and charmed that Ginny released her hold on her. The witch turned to face her, blue eyes narrowed and wand in hand.

“Hermione. Jean. Granger.” Ginny punctuated each word with a jab of her wand in Hermione's direction.

“Glad you've clarified you know my full name,” Hermione tried to jest but her friend looked unamused.

Using her wand as a pointer, she motioned to the bed sharply. “You will sit down and explain yourself.”

Hermione was not about to argue with the redhead and decided to sidle over to her own bed and sit down with a huff, arms folded across her chest. “You sound like your mother.”

She knew she ought to be grateful to her friend, truly. It had been her voice in the hallway to alert them to incoming and unwanted guests. It had been Ginny who had spared her of a massive scandal. Because they had not been engaged in some mere kiss. A kiss she could perhaps talk her way out of. But that? The delicious things the Duke had done with his lips was sinful, at best. There was no fathomable way she could have excused having her skirts hiked up around her waist, legs spread like a wanton, and the Duke between her knees and his mouth in places no man should be unless he was her husband.

“I know you've already told me your egregious plans with the Duke to become his mistress, but you are playing with fire, Hermione,” Ginny urged quietly, despite the fact that she had sealed the room. “You are flaunting that arrangement in the very face of everyone who would see to have you ruined. While I support your— albeit terrible— decision, you two need to exercise caution. Had I not been there—“

“Yeah, why were you there?” Hermione interrupted, her suspicions rousing.

Ginny waved her wand, as if to wave aside the question entirely. “That is none of your concern. Nonetheless, listen to what I have to say, will you? If it had been just Pansy or Romilda to come across the two of you in such a delicate position—“

Her eyes narrowed on her friend. “We were not in any such positions.”

“I meant what he was doing to you—“

“How did you see that?”

“Before you get mad, I was merely looking for you and when I came to your favorite hiding place, I realized there was some magic concealing it—“

Hermione gaped, her cheeks burning as she turned an accusatory glare on her friend, “were you *spying*?!”

Ginny waved her hand dismissively again. “Not intentionally! I just wished to see why there were silencing charms and a very powerful deterrent on the room—“

“Oh, great Merlin’s Beard!” Hermione was mortified.

“It’s fine! I didn’t see much of anything, I swear. Nott, on the other hand...”

“Oh for pixie’s sake, the Viscount was there? Wait— what were you doing alone with the Viscount?”

Ginny had her hands on her hips, despite the fact her cheeks were tinged pink beneath her freckles. “We are discussing what *you* were doing, not I. Let’s stay focused.”

“Oh no, this is far more interesting. We both already know what the Duke and I are engaged in, but you? You have piqued my curiosity. You may be a rule breaker, but not in a *you-might-ruin-your-reputation* way.”

“Hermione, I’m being serious. You say you do not wish to marry the Duke but if someone catches you two, that is exactly what will happen. The damage will be done and you will both be hastened to the altar faster than you can shake a quill at. I worry for you.”

She loathed being chastised by her friend; Hermione had thought this out. This is exactly what she wanted; a commitment free arrangement with the Duke. He offered her much of what she craved. There was no pressure to be anything more than exactly as she was. There was no expectation of her to do anything. This weekend was, she hoped, would be the true first step into this tantalizing agreement between them. In her opportunity to embrace her newfound freedom and be his mistress. The thought of how liberated she would be from all these silly expectations of the ton... it filled her with a sense of relief she no longer would have to tiptoe through society as some delicate maiden who had no interests beyond sewing and no thoughts in her head but marriage.

“I promise Ginny, I am fine. The Duke and I... we plan to finalize our agreement this weekend and I will be moving into his townhome next week. I will finally be free—“

But the redhead was shaking her head, her blue eyes darkening with concern. “You know as well as I do that this will destroy your reputation.”

Hermione rolled her own eyes, “I do not care about that. With his protection, it won’t matter. I will be free to do as I wish. To study. To travel. To never worry about money or—“

Ginny interrupted her, crossing the room to sit beside her on the bed. She reached to take Hermione’s hands in own, “Nor will you be accepted at functions or balls. You will become a

black mark in society. Scoffed at. There will be snickers behind fans and vile rumors spread. Is that what you truly want? To be known solely as the Duke's *whore*?"

She was gaping at her friend, withdrawing her hands. She was not truly mad at Ginny for saying such a thing, because it was exactly what she intended to be. But to hear it so crassly said stung. But it was a reality she would have to come to terms with if she continued on this route.

"Is that what you want?" Ginny repeated, this time more firmly.

Looking away, she felt a pang of uncertainty.

It slithered into her mind, nagging at her. A quiet darkness at the edges of her mind. She knew it would fester and grow.

Hermione needed to sleep on it.

Ginny had planted a fresh seed of doubt.

"I would like to go to bed," Hermione stated quietly, not looking at her friend. Perhaps a full night of rest would return her to her comfort on this arrangement with the Duke. Her excitement felt tainted, suddenly. Perhaps because of the harsh reality of it. Had she been blinded by her own greed for freedom that she had not truly acknowledged how this would truly affect her?

The Duke would remain untarnished, no matter the outcome.

As a man, he was allowed to keep a mistress. He was allowed to have dalliances.

She, on the other hand, was not.

And unfortunately, her annoyance for the way of the world did not alter them.

Ginny was rising to her feet in a rustle of skirts, her hand briefly coming to touch Hermione's shoulder. When the hand did not move away, Hermione raised her gaze to her friend.

"I think you should talk to someone who isn't the Duke about this. Someone who will give you an inside view of the way the male mind works. Someone who has had a mistress." Ginny said quietly. "I think you need to talk to Harry."

~*~

The morning came far too quick for Hermione's taste. The sun peeked through the drapes, falling across her face where she slumbered in the bed. She had wanted to seek out the Duke that night, but had decided against it. She would do as her friend suggested and speak to Harry.

While he had never mentioned it to her, it was implied more than once that Harry indeed had had a mistress at one point in time. Hermione had never known of her name, nor was it something that was discussed. To her credit, Ginny had never seemed distressed by this news. Not that she should be; neither of them were betrothed to the other and were not even considered to be courting. To her latest knowledge, neither of them were truly interested in the other. They had fallen into a comfortable friendship rather than a romance, similar to how she was with Ronald.

Pulling the pillow over her face, Hermione pressed her eyes shut tight against the glaring sun until stars danced behind her lids.

The night before flashed before her eyes like a moving portrait; the feel of Malfoy's lips on her in places she had been too scared to touch herself, the way she completely came undone and melted for him.

How momentarily vulnerable she had been, in a way she had never imagined before.

It was still early, and most of the guests would slumber until noon.

Slipping into a simple pale hyacinth colored robe, she tied it at the waist and stepped into her satin slippers.

The hallways were empty, as she expected.

Even the portraits dozed in their frames. She knew it was a risk to visit Harry so early, but she could wait no longer. Her heart danced against her ribs; she felt odd that she would ask him such a personal and intimate question. It was not her place to know his personal life like that. But if she were to become a mistress... Ginny was right. Harry was an excellent untapped resource of information.

Arriving at his chamber door, she rapped her knuckles lightly against the door.

Silence met her ears and her hand fell to the handle hesitantly. This was a friend she had grown up with; there was no reason to suddenly be ill at ease to be in his company.

A moment passed and the door was pulled from her hand, and a bleary eyes wizard peered at her through the crack.

"He'mione? What are you doing here so early?" Harry asked with a barely contained yawn. "Gin' said you wanted to talk to me about something but couldn't it wait until later? At least after breakfast?"

She pushed the door open and crossed into his room with a shake of her head. He shut the door with a weary sigh, turning to face her. Hermione wrapped her arms around her stomach as she looked at him. He wore nothing but a simple white button up robe, but she made no remark of his disheveled appearance. She had, after all, come to his chambers before most residents had even rolled over in their sleep.

“No, I can’t wait that long,” Hermione replied simply. “Ginny said I needed to ask you about your mistress.”

That simple sentence was enough to cause the sleep to disappear from Harry’s face. He immediately straightened, his lips turning down into a frown and thick brows knitting together.

“You know that is not something—“

“—people talk about in polite conversation, yes,” she finished for him. “But it’s just you and I, Harry. Please. I... I need to know things. I have questions.”

~*~

Harry had not looked away from her while she spoke, his eyes narrowing just ever so slightly on her face. She recognized that look; he was quickly processing every detail in his mind. Anything that could clue him in to her sudden question. He knew some of the details about her and the Duke, but it was likely he had shrugged it off as gossip and hearsay from Ginny and Ron. Those two were pests, most of the time. He adored them, but they could be so unhelpful. Not to mention, Hermione was a smart witch. What had been suggested was asinine and she had to be aware of that fact.

Throwing away her virtue and reputation was reckless.

She may not care for it now, but she would.

Every witch does eventually.

He had learned this the hard way with his own mistress.

Or rather, his first love.

Harry had been a fool to confuse the two, to mix pleasure and romance. It’s a dangerous line to walk and eventually it becomes muddled and confusing.

“What do you want to know that the Duke cannot explain? He is, afterall, supposed to be your consort. Should you not be questioning him?” Harry asked quietly as he locked the door. He had left his wand on the nightstand and crossed to it. Another flick and the room was silenced.

He looked over his shoulder at his friend as his question was greeted by silence. With her arms crossed over her stomach, her curls tumbling free over her shoulders, she looked so young and vulnerable. They were the same age, but sometimes he forgot how different their lives were, what his wealth and status gave him that at the same time, denied her. The knowledge he had been able to acquire because of his gender alone was something she should not know.

But Harry was not one to judge Hermione.

She merely had made judgment based on what she did know. What she had been able to read in her books. It was of no fault of her own that the silly arrangement had seemed too appealing. But Harry could not condone the Duke's hand in this; as another high born wizard, he should know that Hermione's station put her at a disadvantage.

She was naive.

Harry let out a sigh as he tried to figure out the right words to approach this subject as delicately as he could. It was not because he did not think Hermione was unable to handle any of it, but because of his own comfort on the topic. He rarely, if ever, spoke of his mistress.

Or rather, his prior mistress.

"Hermione," He started quietly, "I was in an arrangement very similar to yours, with a lady of the court. Neither of us wanted to marry, not yet anyway. She had been betrothed to some wizard old enough to be her own father and she wanted to escape. We just wanted to... lose ourselves in each other. It was merely a dalliance that became more."

She was looking up at him with wide brown eyes, her expression open and curious. There was no judgment.

"But there was never any scandal—" Hermione started but Harry shook his head sharply.

"There was. The difference is that you were in your own world and never noticed it. Being a wallflower means you escaped the fallout."

A flicker of guilt crossed her face and she looked away from him. "What happened?"

"It was a late night on the eve of a soirée, and we had stole away to the greenhouse. Hidden amongst the fronds, we assumed we were hidden. Safe. Surely, no one would happen upon us there; who wanted to look at some silly flowers?" He felt a pang of bitterness in his chest. "Her betrothed is the one who found us."

Her gaze slid back to his face, "caught you in the act of..?"

"Thankfully, nothing more than a very impassioned embrace. But it was all that was needed to destroy their engagement and for him to withdraw his marriage offer." Harry stepped closer to her, his hand coming up to tuck a wayward curl from her face. "The man did not name me, but of course *she* felt the blow. Don't you see? The women are the ones who always end up at the end of the wand in these situations. I, a Lord, can do as I wish. My reputation remains untouched and hers was in tatters. She only returned to court this year."

"Who is it?"

"Pansy Parkinson."

The Pond, The Scandal

Chapter Notes

I will be on holiday for about two weeks, so there may be a delay in posting the next chapter. I will do my best to get to it, but I apologize if it's a week or so late.

*Darling Readers;
Have you found your way to the sprawling lawns of Malfoy Manor?
The gardens are lovely this time of year.
Such a perfect place to spend your time.
Alone or with another.
Much like the infamous Malfoy Library.
The mansion may be massive but don't forget watchful eyes are everywhere.
I feel there will be some rich gossip in the near future.*

Yours Truly,

Lady Quibbler

The walk back to her own chambers had been uneventful and silent, not a soul in sight. The portraits still slumbered within their frames and Hermione met no one. She dressed for breakfast in a simple morning gown, a touch more elegant than her usual attire. It was made of a soft white satin, with a high lace neckline and long sleeves. The fabric flowed over her body comfortably, ending just at the top of her toes. A flick of her wand and her hair was spun into a careless bun atop her head, which she tied off with a silk ribbon.

Pinching her cheeks briefly to add a spot of color to hide her restless parlor, Hermione slipped her wand into the hidden pocket in her skirt and made her way down to the Breakfast Hall. She doubted many would be awake at this hour, and indeed only a few stragglers had found their way to the table and none of which she was eager to fraternize with.

The idea of forced conversation made Hermione internally groan.

She found a seat, far enough to give her solitude but not quite to be rude.

As soon as she sat down, a plate popped into view in front of her and a *crack* beside her announced the arrival of a house elf. The little creature set a glass down on the table beside her before disappearing once more. Plates and trays were heaped with food along the center of the table, swirls of steam rising lazily into the air.

The curtains of the room had been drawn open to allow the warm morning sun in, rays falling across Hermione and chasing away the lingering morning chill. She filled her platter with a variety of goods, hardly one to skip a meal or eat lightly. She liked to keep her mind well fed, after all.

Perhaps that was why some of these lovely folk were such ninnies— they were skipping their breakfasts.

Hermione chewed on her slice of bread in thought as she mulled over her musings from the night before; she had not really slept much after meeting with Harry. She was exhausted and perhaps a touch overwhelmed. It was not that she was surprised that Harry had had a mistress; most Lord's did accrue one at some point.

The thing that sat most unwell with her was the fact that Harry had taken a Lady as a lover. Not to say it didn't happen, but it seemed foolish on his part. As he had stated, Pansy had been betrothed to another.

But that would explain his ire at her own plans.

She considered the cut piece of sausage on her fork, turning it slowly between her fingertips in thought; While Ginny had been seemingly on board in the beginning, it seemed she was reevaluating things. Hermione did not think her friend was necessarily trying to *stop* her from doing as she wanted, but more to give her the knowledge of things she did not previously have. Ginny knew that Hermione was a stubborn witch, *Hermione* knew she was as well. She had set her mind on this idea of freedom that the Duke was offering her, so she would have it. One way or another, she would carve her own future. And her dear friend was just showing her a piece of the book she had not had the opportunity to read yet.

It did throw a hex into the situation.

Finishing breakfast, Hermione felt odd leaving her finished plate to be cleaned by an elf but did so reluctantly. She found her way back to her chambers to change for a more appropriate gown for the upcoming evening. She did not have the luxury of the several outfits most witches would cycle into throughout the day, but she did have magic. She was able to tweak her gown slightly to appear to be a new piece. Enlarging the lace at her throat, shrinking her sleeves. Changing the color, even.

Magic, such a blessing in the disguise of witchcraft.

The day was simple in nature; for lunch until dinner, guests were implored to venture outside to enjoy the delectable summer air. The sun was bright, the breeze gentle and birds adding a lovely melody to the atmosphere.

The lawn that expanded around Malfoy Manor was expansive and impeccably maintained. Rows of hedges lined the walkways, flowering rose bushes swayed gently in the breeze. Hermione joined her mother at the pond in the center of the grounds, a short walk from the mansion.

“Good morning, Mother,” Hermione bent to press a kiss to the shorter woman's cheek.

Her mother took her hand, patting it warmly. “Hermione, my dear. Such a lovely day, is it not? I was thinking we could take one of those dinghy’s about the pond?”

Hermione looked towards the boat her mother spoke about; several diminutive wooden boats with a pair of simple wooden benches inside the shallow bowl. A lantern hung at the bow, swaying gently in the small waves of the pond. Oars rest in their holdings, but it seemed as if they were mere decorations. The boats themselves were imbued with magic, ferrying their occupants about the lake in slow circles.

“That sounds like a lovely idea, Mother. Perhaps we could take the opportunity to discuss some things?”

~*~

“And you’ll do *what?*” A woman’s voice, a touch shrill, echoed off the pond.

Draco glanced at the disturbance, just as most of the other guests scattered about the pond did. Who didn’t love a ripe bit of gossip and scandal? Even the wizards playing violin had stopped to watch the scene unfold. He absently patted his mother’s hand, which was tucked into the crook of his arm, as they drew to a halt just at the shoreline. He narrowed his eyes to look at the witch, who was standing upright in one of the small boats.

No, not a witch.

The only Muggle in attendance.

Lady Granger was glowering down at her daughter, hands waving beside her as she visibly continued to scold her grown child. Hermione was visibly sulking on her bench, the boat swaying back and forth as her mother became more agitated. The older woman’s hat had slipped off her head, falling into the water to reveal the mass of curls her daughter had inherited.

His own mother had stepped away from him to walk out onto the small dock, her wand coming to touch her throat to help magnify her voice; “Lady Granger, Miss Granger! I wouldn’t be standing up in the boat like that—“ Narcissa was saying and Hermione’s mother turned sharply, causing the boat to dip suddenly and the edge slip under the water. The words of warning were spoken too late and the pair were launched sideways into the shallow water with a shriek, a round of chattering and chortles following suit from the people who witnessed it; “—it’ll flip...”

“Oh dear,” Narcissa added as she dropped her wand from her swan-like neck to look over her shoulder at Draco. “We should summon an elf with some towels, yes?”

The two women in the water were flailing about in their waterlogged skirts, struggling to get to the shore. Hermione's simple hat dropped pitifully and her curls had become straight in the water. The pond was not very deep, but it could be alarming if one did not know how to swim. Or if over encumbered with a dress.

"Do you think we should—?" Narcissa was saying even as Draco shrugged off his coat and leapt off the edge of the dock and into the water.

With long strokes of his arms through the water, Draco made short work of the distance to the two women flailing in the water. A boat had bobbed its way over and the two occupants were aiding Lady Granger into it, while he reached Hermione just in time to slip his arm around Hermione's waist, pulling her to his chest and above the water. She had been floundering, face dipping beneath the surface far too much for his comfort. Did the chit *not* know how to swim? Sure, not everyone did but he would have assumed *she* would for the simple fact she has the driving need to master *everything*.

Her gloved hands clung to his shoulders—well, *one* gloved hand, as the other was floating away from them— and she was breathing heavily. Water droplets clung to her eyelashes and Draco back pedaled through the water to the shore.

The wet mud squelched beneath his ruined shoes as he helped her upright, their wet clothing clinging to their bodies. She lifted the brim of her ruined hat away from her face as she looked up at Draco. Her dark curls were lax from the weight of the water, spilling freely down her back and clinging to her neck and cheeks. The water was not terribly cold, but the breeze that teased through the air caused goosebumps to dance along her arms and her bottom lip to tremble, just ever so slightly.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still.

"Do you not know how to swim, Granger?" Draco asked in concentration and a hint of jest entered his tone. She opened her mouth to report when she was interrupted by Narcissa, the older witch having joined them on the banks of the pond; stopping just before the grass turned wet and muddy, as if to spare her slippers from being ruined. His mother had hurried around to their side, hastily throwing Draco's coat over Hermione's shoulders to shield her from any indecency.

"Are you alright, Miss Granger?" Narcissa was asking in a hushed and polite tone, snapping Draco out of it, "let's get you and your mother inside, have some tea brought up to your rooms, yes?"

There was a quiet murmur through the audience and Narcissa was quick to divert their attention, waving her hand dedicated at the band to resume playing their music. He hastily released Hermione, realizing he had held her a touch too long to be considered appropriate. He stepped back, giving her the proper space as his mother assisted her further up the bank. He carded his fingers through his damp hair, pushing the blond strands from his brow as he followed them.

The boat carrying Lady Granger had barely hit the dock before the matron was leaping free from her, wet hat hanging from her fingers as she marched determinedly in their direction.

She pointed a finger at Draco, dark eyes narrowed on his face. His own mothers brows shot up a notch.

“*You*,” Lady Granger practically growled as she reached them.

He felt a hitch of anxiety. She may be small, but in this moment the muggle woman was very much a lion protecting her cub. And she had her dagger like nails pointed at him.

Oh, Circe.

She knew.

People were still watching and Narcissa was quick to find her wand, casting a silencing charm about them. “Lady Granger, I was just telling my son how we need to get you two inside and warmed up. Some tea—?”

Lady Granger rounded on the other witch, her finger still pointing almost accusingly. Draco could feel her ire, but it softened as she looked at Narcissa. “I apologize for my— my outburst— I’m assuming you’ve cast some—” she waved a hand next to her face, “silencing magic? I’m sorry, Hermione has told me the name but I do not know what it’s called. But yes. Let us go inside and away from prying eyes and ears. All of us. But most especially, your *son*.”

She had glanced in his direction, her eyes narrowing with some unspoken accusation. He knew she was just barely biting her tongue from spitting her thoughts; a trait her daughter had inherited.

“Mama—” Hermione tried, stepping forward but her mother held up a dismissive hand.

“Hermione. Not now. We will discuss this inside. Now, march up to your chambers and get changed. We will meet with the Malfoys in one of their rooms.”

“My study, in the North Wing, is warded and private,” Narcissa chimed in helpfully, her face smooth and showing little emotion. All a carefully curated falsehood, designed for situations such as this. One did not grow up in this world, or become a Duchess, by showing all your cards and wearing your heart on your sleeve.

~*~

The study was silent.

So much so that one could hear the distant chatter of guests outside and the occasional caw of a stray peacock in the gardens. Narcissa swore she could hear the gossip of the hallway portraits, despite having the room silenced and warded. No portraits resided in her private

study; it was her one place of solitude, after all. There were only a few rooms in the entire mansion that offered such privacy, beside bedrooms.

Narcissa had immediately gone to the study to summon an elf to bring a tray of warm tea, settling in one of the winged chairs beside the fireplace to wait. Her son arrived shortly after she did, having escorted the two women upstairs to their chambers.

And he slunk in like he had a secret weighing him down.

Her eyes narrowed on his barely concealed guilty expression, watching him as he folded his body into a seat across from her.

“Why do I feel as if you are about to have a bloody duel with a Muggle woman in my family heirloom filled home?” She asked suspiciously.

From the way Lady Granger had glared at her son, Narcissa had realized that the woman was not to be trifled with and she was incredibly protective of her only child. Much the same way that Narcissa was over Draco; except that she knew she could not always protect her son. And at this moment, she doubted his innocence. Most mothers fawned over him, so whatever he was about to be accused of was something great.

“I assure you, I have no idea what you are referring to.” Draco responded lightly, looking down at his hand. He adjusted the silver family signet ring upon his finger.

“Draco. Lucius. *Malfoy*.” Narcissa leaned forward in her chair, blue eyes set upon her son’s face. Her voice dropped to a whisper, “What did you *do*?” He was spared having to answer her as a knock sounded at the door, and Narcissa pointed a warning finger at her son before calling out, “Come in!”

The door opened to admit Hermione and her mother, both of them filing in and finding a seat beside them. Narcissa looked at the two, studying them from beneath her lashes as she used her wand to fill two elegant fine china teacups with warm tea. She floated them across the room to find their owners. For a moment, Lady Granger looked almost child-like in appearance as she watched, wide eyed with wonder. Narcissa had to remember that this was a Muggle, after all. Her introduction to magic had been when her daughter had presented. Even with years of exposure, it was still likely a wonder to her.

Her daughter, Hermione, appeared to be almost sulking. Her expression was similar to her son’s; a touch forlorn, a bit anxious. *Guilty* of something. She was fidgeting in her seat, hand coming out to catch the saucer of her cup. It rattled as her hand trembled slightly. She had changed, just as her mother had, into a fresh gown. A simple style and cut, one that Narcissa would generally consider to be a one of low-born members of society. But somehow, it suited the young witch. The pale pink enhanced the lovely tone of her skin, making her freckles that danced across her cheeks appear to be enhancements rather than something to be frowned upon.

“Lady Granger,” Narcissa interrupted the silence. “Let us discuss your concerns, shall we? Whatever they may, I am sure we can—“

“Your son has asked *my daughter* to be his mistress,” the muggle woman said without couth, her eyes shrewd and expression hard.

Three sets of eyes swung to look at Draco, the very son she was accusing of such a thing. He visibly squirmed in his chair, but for only a breath of a moment. He quickly composed himself, straightening and letting his mask slip into place. Just like his father before him, Draco was a natural Occlumens. There were times he adopted it without even realizing he had erected the walls, obscuring himself from those around him. Most did not notice it, and if they did, they atoned it to a sense of aloofness and haughtiness.

“Draco, is this true?” Narcissa asked quietly. She set her cup on the side table, trying to hide the waver in her voice. It was a strong accusation. A damning one. And if it were true...

“It is,” Hermione interjected, her own saucer and cup now resting on her knees. Her face was determined and her chin lifted as she looked at Narcissa. “We came to the agreement mutually. I was not coerced into it in any way. I have not been.... Uhm, I have not been *ruined*, yet.”

It was obvious she was trying to find a polite way of explaining things; her cheeks were turning a brilliant shade of pink. As were Draco’s. He had folded his hands in his lap, as if to try and exude a sense of calm. He was failing. She knew her son too well; he may not appear it, but he was a touch embarrassed at the bold topic at hand. Perhaps even remorseful that they were even discussing such clandestine matters.

He had always enjoyed his privacy and anonymity, considering who he was.

“*You* chose this?” Narcissa was baffled.

Hermione nodded her head, “it seemed like the best course of action for someone well... like *me*. ”

“Like *you*—? What do you mean?” Narcissa asked with a growing frown. Was this young lady already tarnished? She had never heard of the witch before her son had started showing interest in her.

“Yes, someone in my station. My parents are not of your society,” she shook her head and corrected herself, “our society. They are not born into wealth. They do much for me but there is only so much a woman such as myself can do. And none of them interest me.”

“Oh, honey,” Lady Granger’s hard expression had softened slightly at her daughter's words, reaching out to touch her wrist. “You know we have no qualms about letting you stay home with us. We never meant to push you into this situation and make it feel as if you had no choice.”

“Mother, I know you and Papa have done so much for me. I could never demand or expect more. And it’s not what I want. I want my independence. My own opportunity to grow and learn. A chance to...” Hermione grew quiet as she looked at Draco across from her, her cheeks growing red. “A chance to be *with* someone but not expected to become someone I am not.”

Draco, who had been studiously looking at his hands, now was watching Hermione with a curious expression. It was partially masked, but she saw through the cracks. A touch of fondness, perhaps.

“You know you cannot continue on this path, Hermione. If anyone saw you two or assumed... It’s already gossiped you two are courting. But this? You cannot do this. There would be absolutely no turning back.” Lady Granger explained quietly. She turned her attention to Narcissa, “I think you and I need to discuss this, privately. Without them in attendance.”

Looking between the two, Narcissa slowly nodded her head. Indeed, she had heard the same rumors that they were courting, but it appeared that was *not* the case at all. It was far more debauched. And perhaps they could get away with such a thing, but eventually even the most hidden of secrets are discovered. Truly, Draco would remain mostly unharmed from any slander. His title alone shielded him. But Narcissa could not, in any good conscious, allow him to ruin a young lady.

“Yes, I believe that would be best. You two—“ she gestured at the pair of them, “leave us.”

They both rose to their feet to head to the door and Narcissa chimed in again, “and I don’t mean go slink off to some nook with each other.”

Less than amused, they left the chamber one after the other and Draco shut the door behind him. She trusted they would follow the more or less direct order and leave her and Lady Granger in peace to discuss their situation. And find a way to curb any rumors or gossip that may begin.

The Perfect Arrangement; Or Is It?

Draco knew that their mothers had meant for them to *leave* the room entirely, as in go elsewhere, but they would have been fools to think that either of them were about to leave without trying to eavesdrop. Both were keen to see what their decided fate would be. Neither enjoyed the idea that it would be decided for them.

Unfortunately their loitering had yielded little results; the room had been silenced.

How disappointing.

Leaning a shoulder against the wall, he folded his arms across his waist as he cast Hermione an annoyed look. "I told you that confiding in your mother was a bad idea."

Hermione let out an exasperated sigh as she turned away from the door to look at him. Her nearly dry hair was delightfully frizzy about her face, a few wayward strands poking out from the bun she had tumbled her curls into. "Well she would have questioned my sudden desire to move into your townhouse, My Lord. Heaven forbid I have a healthy relationship with my mother and inform her of my decision—"

"Which was utterly moronic."

"— To become a mistress. Will you let me finish?" She gave him a withering look. "It's a life changing decision, and one that—"

"She clearly did not approve of," Draco chimed in as he leveled a cool expression on her. He rather was contrite that their arrangement was being questioned and likely brought to an end. "I could have told you that. As I've stated before, what mother wants their child to become someone's *heaux*? None. The ploy to pretend we were courting—"

She had crossed her arms to mirror him, one dainty slipper peering out from beneath the hem of her gown. She tapped it against the floor in annoyance. "Which was *your idea*, by the way. I said it would never work. And here we are now. With my mother expecting you to follow through on a betrothal."

"Well my idea was far more sound than just blurting out to the world our *arrangement*. I was trying to spare your reputation, Granger." He pushed himself away from the wall to close the distance between them, looking down at her. "In case you forgot, they tend to be rather important in our society. And women are criticized rather harshly."

Hermione lifted her chin, honey brown eyes sparking in warning. "I am very aware we live in a society built on patriarchal views that have little interest beyond producing heirs and expanding wealth. An elaborate, overplayed game of wizards chess. The entire system is rigged against witches who wish to be independent and have other futures planned for themselves other than just being some *broodmare*."

“*Broodmare?*” He wanted to laugh at her choice of words but he feared she would hex him, or at least slap him. Her ire was pleasantly charming. “Is that what you think I would consider you?”

She looked exasperated, “*No*, you’ve stated quite clearly you don’t wish to wed or have children so—“

“And so have you.”

“Exactly.” Her tone was that of finality.

“I already know what is going to happen,” Draco stated calmly. “Your mother will insist I follow through on the courtship we eluded to and we solidify our engagement.”

“I just need to talk—“ she moved as if to knock on the door.

He caught her wrist with ease, stopping her from knocking her knuckles against the wood. “You’ve tried talking to her, Granger. *You’ve tried* and failed. She does not see it the same way as you, and I know my mother will not either. They are from the very world you are trying to escape.”

“Malfoy...”

“Granger.”

“We cannot wed.”

“I agree.”

“But?”

“I don’t think they will give us the option, unless we wish to suffer a scandal.”

Hermione was silent for a long moment as she looked at him. She was reminded that *he* was a Duke. One of the wealthiest and most desirable wizards in the country. Scandal could tarnish his name and he would be fine. Pansy had suffered scandal, and the only reason she had ever been accepted back into polite society was her wealth and title. Neither of which Hermione had. She had prided herself on being a wallflower, a nobody. Going unnoticed. A scandal would destroy that tranquility and peace, while simultaneously ruining her. And her parents would suffer as well; perhaps not as much as her, but fallout never settled close to the damage.

His grip on her wrist lessened. “We will just have to wait and see what they decide on, okay? There is no reason to jump to conclusions just yet.”

Ding ding ding.

The sound of a wand tapping against the side of a champagne glass filled the air. A tinkling, lyrical sound. Draco looked up at his mother as she rose smoothly to her feet, a mild smile that didn't quite reach her blue eyes upon her face as she gazed at all the faces around her. The sound of people eating and conversing lessened as their attention shifted towards her at the head of the table. It was common for the Head of House to greet their guests within the first two days of any gathering; with Lucius gone, that task fell to her. She waved her wand with a flourish and pressed the tip of it to her throat.

"I would like to offer a warm welcome to my late arriving guests." Her voice rang out loud and clear across the room. She lifted her glass towards Neville Longbottom, Baron of Meadwood. His cheeks flushed slightly as he nodded his head in greeting. The wizard had inherited his title young, much like Draco, upon the death of both of his parents in an accident. "Thank you for joining us, my lord. I am pleased you were able to make it out here to the lovely countryside of Wiltshire. And a thank you to everyone else who has ventured out to the Estate to enjoy the celebration and frivolities that we can offer you."

Many of the guests murmured in response, lifting their own glasses.

Narcissa tipped her head as she waved her wand through the air. "But of course, we all know events as grand as this are only ever held for a reason."

There was a ripple of excited whispers, a shifting of bodies. She was right of course. Galas, soirées, balls, dinners—they were held by the elite for only a few reasons, most of which centered around the advancement of their own wealth and families.

"And I had planned to wait until the last day to make the announcement but I find myself far too eager—" she glanced at her son, blue eyes warning him to keep his silence. "My son, the Duke of Wiltshire, has decided to take a wife."

Draco felt everyone's gaze shift to him now; he didn't mind the attention, not really. It was hard to not grow accustomed to it when one was in the station and position he was in. But he felt a slight twitch of anxiety, and his cheeks grew with the inevitable. He straightened in his chair as he kept his face clear of any emotion, carefully schooling his expression to be of mild interest.

Narcissa waited for what felt like an eternity and the witches and wizards gathered at the table held their breaths. "He has asked for the hand of the young Miss Hermione Granger."

There was an almost laughable silence, and he swore Draco heard a '*who is that?*' whispered from somewhere down the table. Ever the one to smooth her way through any situations, Narcissa continued as she motioned towards her son to whisper, "On your feet, Draco." She turned her attention to Hermione, who was just down the table a few chairs. She flicked her wand in a gesture to encourage the younger witch to rise to her feet. "And you as well, Miss Granger."

Instead, Hermione visibly shrank further into her seat. Lady Granger patted her hand on the table and leaned forward to whisper something into her daughter's ear. Hermione's face had turned an endearing shade of scarlet, the color painting her cheeks and running down along her neck to the color her collarbones and chest. Her freckles seemed to stand out brilliantly as people turned to look at her. That alone was enough to drive Draco to his feet. He rather liked watching the witch squirm. Served her right for trying to confide in her mother after he had warned her of the perils of entrusting anyone else to their arrangement.

Draco smoothed a hand along the front of his coat, letting a faint smile touch his lips. He lifted his glass, motioning towards Hermione. She narrowed her eyes on him slightly as her lips thinned. Her fingers had caught the stem of her own wine glass and he rather thought she meant to snap it in half.

"I know, it takes you all by surprise that I would ask a *wallflower* for her hand in marriage," Draco drawled slowly as he looked at each of the faces at the table, "but what all of you buffoons missed, I saw a potential in. A fire. Miss Granger may not be well known, but that is because while you all have been fostering false friendships and alliances, she has been fostering her intelligence and independence."

A fork dropped somewhere and more than one mouth gaped openly at him. It positively thrilled him to no end until his mother discreetly smacked his arm with her wand, letting out a tinkling laugh that warned him of a scolding later. Someone coughed loudly.

"What my son *meant* by that is that he could not help but notice Miss Granger's—intelligence. She is a brilliant young witch and I am quite pleased my son has found her and she will be joining our family."

Hermione had slipped down further into her seat, to where Draco feared she might fall right underneath the table and sneak away like the little mouse she imagined herself to be.

"Do join us, Miss Granger," Narcissa called warmly, holding her hand out towards the other witch.

"*Get your arse—*" Hermione's mother could be heard hissing and the sound of her chair scraping silenced it as she rose to her feet.

"Yes, come up here in front of everyone and join us," Draco drawled, practically beaming at her discomfort. The wallflower had been torn away from her corner and thrust into a limelight.

Hermione flounced up towards them, shaking out her skirts with, dare he say, a huff. She made her way up and around the table to come stand on the opposite side of Narcissa.

"Smile," Draco purred quietly behind his mother's back.

Her eyes narrowed on him as her hand fished its way into her concealed pocket, and she whispered back, "I'm going to *hex* you—"

"I look forward to it—"

“So if you could all wish your congratulations on the newly engaged couple,” Narcissa interrupted them, stepping back for them to be put at the forefront. Thrust back into the limelight, Hermione simmered down instantly. Draco stepped closer to her as he lifted his glass in a toast. “The future Duchess of Wiltshire.”

~*~

“Well that could have gone a lot worse, I say,” Ginny chimed in helpfully as she caught up to Hermione, her arm slinking into the crook of hers. Hoping for a quiet stroll in the gardens, Hermione had ignored the hurried sound of slippers on gravel as she walked in a vain attempt to keep her silence. She had wanted to be *alone*, after all. She had not slowed her brisk stride for her friend; not that it mattered. Ginny had longer legs and catching up had been an easy feat.

The gardens here were expansive, sprawling really. Beautifully kept rows of hedges and flowers. Blossoms drifted lazily through the air around them, bees buzzing as they traversed from plant to plant, their little furry bodies covered in pollen. It was magical, in a natural sense. Little blue pixies remained hidden amongst the bushes, hiding from the heat of the day, likely waiting for nightfall to emerge and pester passersby.

“It could have not happened at all,” Hermione replied bitterly. There was an emptiness inside of her at the thought of the Duchess’s announcement and that there was no escaping her fate. “And now it has, and it’s done.”

It’s official, inescapable. A future, now set in stone before a jury of their peers.

“It’ll be for the best,” Ginny replied quietly, giving her arm a gentle squeeze.

She knew her beloved friend was trying to be positive, for her sake. Ginny had tried to warn her, tried to show her what could occur from her transgression. An alternative future with no happy ending and only snide whispers and comments. A future where she was shunned from society; even if she did not truly wish to be a part of it, she would have relied on it. As a mistress, a governess, or whatever she ended up doing in her life.

Not that it mattered now.

It was set. Her reputation would remain untarnished. She would become a duchess and marry into an unimaginable wealth and desirable position. The downside was that she would be expected to produce an heir for the family and be an upstanding member of society.

She cringed at the idea.

Hosting soirées, luncheons, and galas.... They were just not her cup of tea.

“How will it be for the best, Ginevra? How will doing exactly what I never wished to do be *for the best?*” Hermione knew that she should be grateful that things had gone this way.

Narcissa had spared her of a worse fate when she had no obligation to, and spared her family the shame and embarrassment that would come with it.

“Because the Duke seems to be a kind man, at least. And you could have fared worse.”

Tucking a curl behind her ear, Hermione tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “I could have not married at all.”

She knew her friend was looking out for her wellbeing. She knew her mother was doing that as well. And truth be told, now knowing that Harry and Pansy had gone through a similar ordeal had made her hesitant to continue on with the arrangement with Draco. But it had not scared her away entirely from the promise of her own freedom. It was and had been the most important aspect in her life.

Ginny let out a beleaguered sigh as she cast her eyes skyward, her hat shielding her fair skin from the harshest rays of sun. She lowered her voice to a whisper, as if to hide their conversation from any eavesdroppers.

“Do you not wish to be intimate with the Duke?”

Hermione felt her cheeks growing warm as she cast a glance around them. As far as everyone was aware, they had not been intimate in any manner as of yet. They had been merely courting and she was an innocent wallflower. Yet the memory of what they had done, as small as it was, caused a warmth to creep through her person. Just the memory of him, kneeling between her legs, his hands warm against her bare skin...

“Of course I do,” she whispered back.

Ginny squeezed her arm as she leaned in close. They had paused beside the fountain in the center of the gardens, the merry splashing of water hiding their words. “Then pretend that this marriage is nothing more than the arrangement. You two can continue whatever it was you were doing, and now there will be no repercussions for it. You will be free to do as you wish.”

She was hesitant. it still felt as if she were betraying everything she had fought so hard to avoid. True, the Duke was a *kind* man. An annoying one, with the pesky habit of causing her hackles to raise and tease her to the point she wished to hex the wizard, but he was hardly the worst of suitors. She could have easily been paired with a less desirable wizard, forced to marry someone she had no intention to wed. She could have been pushed to marry Harry. Or *Ronald*.

Both were her friends but neither interested her in that manner. She could not imagine bedding either of them. She had chastely kissed Ron, once, after a holiday party. They had been young and frivolous. But it had been awkward and as if she were kissing a brother. And Harry? It had been a bit more intimate, a heat of the moment exchange. But it had been nothing in the way it felt to kiss the Duke. There had been no sparks, no heat. No burning *desire*. It had been a kiss of exploration and it had ended when they had realized they were companions, and nothing more.

And that was where she thought it had ended.

That Hermione would be a spinster, and she had been content in that.

Because the sparks she had heard about did not exist.

Not until now, that is.

Not until the Duke of Wiltshire had dragged her from the shadows and forced her out of her shell. Until he had challenged her, as none had before. He was an unrelenting prat, but it had intrigued her rather than annoyed her. He had chafed her sensibilities and raised her ire. But it was *different* with him. Harry and Ronald caused her irritation on the daily. It was not uncommon to be annoyed by her friends.

But Draco was *not* her friend.

He had never been that.

It had never been offered, either.

He had simply forced his way into her life and disrupted her carefully laid life plans. Gripped them so tight and chucked them out the window.

His tenacity and boldness both ensured her attention and pissed her off.

It made her wish to hex that stupid smirk of his off his face and smother him with her own lips.

It was entirely confusing.

Perhaps Ginny was right. Perhaps she spoke the truth that while they would be married in name, that was all it had to be. Somehow she knew that the Duke would not force her to bear any children for him. He would not force her to reside in the same home, either. He had made a promise to give her her own space as a mistress, and she somehow knew he would uphold that promise even though the situation had changed.

And perhaps Ginny was right in the fact that this meant the Duke and her would be able to continue that arrangement, but not under the security of a marriage.

There would be no guilt, no ruined reputations, no scandal.

There was a tingle of excitement now, coiling with that dark sense of anxiety. Perhaps a faint sense of hope mixed with despair. She loathed the idea that she had no control over this situation, but perhaps that was what she needed for once. Hermione needed to give up that control and let things occur naturally.

“I hope you plan to take advantage of this opportunity, Hermione,” Ginny said quietly as she turned her blue eyes to watch the fountain. Her face was soft in thought, eyes distant. Who was she thinking of, Hermione wondered. “I know I would.”

A Folly

There was nothing more than Hermione wished to do than stay in her chambers the rest of the weekend, only to emerge at nightfall like some spirit and slip into the library. And she was not *mad* at the Duke, not really. It wasn't his fault things had taken this turn. But she was still irked, nonetheless.

And yet she found herself seated prettily upon an uncomfortable antique settee with a gaggle of giggling witches. Her tea remained untouched and biscuit only nibbled upon. Her mother had informed her that it was common for the women to get together like this as a way of showing their support and offering their congratulations.

It felt more like a funeral.

Nothing but gossip and waving of lips.

Hermione had tried to smuggle a book in her pocket but that had been the moment her mother had come upon her and promptly removed it, chastising her.

"As a future Duchess, you must learn to deal with these situations. Whether you wish to or not, social situations are common practice."

So now here she sat, quiet and withdrawn. Ginny had somehow weaseled herself out of this, likely laughing at her from the comfort of her room with her brother or Harry. What a bunch of cockwombles. She listened with half an ear to the conversation around her. Teapots of different flavors floated lazily through the air. Small platters of biscuits and croissants shuffled tables. With the curtains open, no candles were lit as the sunlight poured into the room. It wasn't until Narcissa herself appeared that Hermione dragged herself out from her sulking.

The matron witch had had a change of clothes; her robes sleek and elegant, yet simple. The shadow was a dark viridian green, a color Hermione noted to be favored throughout the house. It complimented her fair skin and enhanced the matron's haughty beauty. She seemed to glide into the room effortlessly, her wand flared out into a fan. She waved it delicately to herself as she smiled at everyone. Ice blue eyes scanned the room until they found her. Hermione felt herself shrink into her seat, just slightly.

"Miss Granger," Narcissa greeted her, "Lady Granger. I am so glad you could join us for this celebration of your nuptials."

"It appears I had no choice," Hermione replied, which earned her an elbow to the ribs. "But I am most delighted to be here."

Narcissa tapped her wand against her palm and the fan disappeared. She lightly set it upon the table, a bemused smirk touching her lips as her voice lowered for only them. "My son warned me you had a sharp tongue. It seems he was correct. You would prefer to be elsewhere, I presume? The library, perhaps? Or the study?"

“I am grateful for this—“ Hermione tried to explain but the older witch waved a dismissive hand, delicate fingers fluttering.

“Oh hush, Miss Granger. You are to be a duchess, and you need not explain yourself to me or anyone else. You will be able to do as you wish, within reason of course. Once you are wed, you will reside here and you may choose any room to your liking to be converted into a space for yourself.” Narcissa waited for the floating teapot to fill her cup before lifting it carefully to her painted lips. She leaned towards Hermione, her voice a conspiratorial whisper. “You’ve made an appearance, so if you would like you may be able to slip away shortly. I like to wait until at least one other has left before I make my leave.”

Hermione blinked owlishly at the witch, who took another drink of her tea delicately. She was watching the other witches with polite interest. Most were settled in around other tables to talk to their friends and companions, and a few mingled while standing. It was, if one liked such a settling, comfortable. But Hermione preferred a more private environment, one where she was surrounded by books and silence.

“My son is enduring the company of his male friends just down the hall in his study,” Narcissa continued conversationally, but Hermione felt it was more of a polite way for her to allow Hermione to keep her silence. “He’s much like you, Miss Granger, in the fact he prefers his solitude.”

“Until he pestered me all the weeks ago, I had never heard of Ma— His Grace. But I never bothered to socialize much with anyone above my station.” Hermione replied quietly. She reached for her teacup, her thumb tracing the delicate handle in thought.

Odd, she thought, that she had never met the Duke sooner. How many times had their paths crossed and neither noticed the other? How many times had she slipped into a library, just as he was leaving? She tried to picture him at the soirées she had been forced to attend. Hermione knew he had never noticed her before, because that is what she had wanted. She had curated her life to near perfection of going unnoticed.

Narcissa was quiet for a moment as she set down her cup. Two young witches had risen to their feet, dipping a curtsy in their direction to excuse themselves. They left the room, likely to seek out entertainment elsewhere on the grounds.

“My son uses his station as a barrier. His title, his wealth... All of this.” She didn't use a hand to motion, but her eyes swept the room. “None of this matters to him. Because it matters so much to everyone else. You’re one of the few who never looked at him and saw a Duke, you saw—“

“A rake?”

“*Hermione!*” Lady Granger admonished hastily, apologizing to Narcissa.

But the witch merely chortled quietly, her lips twitching into a smirk similar to her sons. “It’s quite alright, Lady Granger. She is not wrong. We may have... spoiled our son a fair bit. As an only child and heir, it only felt right. Turns out, he needs a firm hand to guide him.” She

lifted her cup towards the door. “I do believe you have an opportunity to slip away now, Miss Granger.”

Hermione did not need to be told twice. She was quick to take the leave offered to her by the other witch, perhaps even more curious as to why the duchess would be so understanding and kind to her when she was the cause of their engagement.

~*~

The study was thick with cigar smoke. Most of the wizards had gathered in the room to linger in some form of congratulations; which meant gambling and tomfoolery. Vintage bottles of liquor floated from table to table— having been magically summoned at the request of the various guests. Cards slid across the table and chips clinked as they were stacked and shuffled about. The air was filled with a festive nature and warm chatter while someone had turned on the phonograph that was on a table to the side. There were no records, but music floated through the golden tube nonetheless.

As of right now, Draco sat alone at his table. The others came and went, but none stayed for long. Perhaps because he was in no real mood for their small talk and false joviality. He may have been groomed to be in this society, to entertain and be *charming*... but overall it was not what he enjoyed. He would rather be anywhere but here, crammed into the smoke filled room that was once his father's. He grimaced.

“Congratulations are in order, I see,” Theo said as he swaggered forward, two glasses in hand. He held one out to Draco with a smirk. “I knew you wouldn't stop at *just a kiss*. You never know when to call it quits.”

Rolling his eyes in annoyance, Draco took the glass and then a big gulp of the liquid. The firewhiskey burned his throat. “Oh shut up, Nott. I've never been *engaged* to be wed before so clearly I do know when to call it quits.”

“Only because your prior dalliances were not of noble birth, Malfoy. You should have been aware of the risk once you stopped playing the silly game. A kiss? Really? You thought that was all you would want from her?” Theo tutted quietly as he settled into the chair across from him. “If it was me, I would be happily sitting in your seat. *A kiss*.” He was scoffing as he took another drink.

Draco leveled a look at his friend, severely tempted to free his wand from the inside pocket of his coat and hex the man. He felt a pang of jealousy at the thought of Theo being engaged to Hermione. Odd, because he had been eager for that bet so early on. But it had been a mere game then, to see if she would be drawn out of her shell of solitude. Some petty desire to lure the wallflower out of her comfort zone and into their world.

But in reality, it had forced him out of his own shadows and into her light.

It was unexpected but not... entirely unwelcome. He did not loathe the idea of marrying Hermione. There were far worse options out there, more for her than him. True, due to his status as a Duke he could have easily walked away and kept his hands clean. She would have been ruined but he would have been primarily fine. Free to continue about his life as if she had never been there. A welcomed nuisance.

He had not really thought out their upcoming nuptials beyond the simple fact that they would, more than likely, just continue where they left off. The only drastic change to their arrangement was the fact that they no longer had to pretend it did not exist. As husband and wife, they could be as bold and open about their relations as they wished. There would be no side-eye or shame. Draco could go to any event with her on his arm.

Is that what he wanted?

Or would he miss the freedom he had as a rake?

“No matter,” Theo was still talking, “I think the lass will give you a run for your money. Not literally, I don’t think the chit gives a blast about your wealth. But you... I think you have your hands full with this one.”

“You were pretty quick to back out of our bet, Nott.” Draco wanted to turn the conversation off him. He did not want to think about *her* anymore. His thoughts were a confusing mess.

“Because you were obviously smitten before we even made the bet—“

“I absolutely was *not*—“ Draco argued.

Theo continued as if he didn’t note the interruption, “and I would have been a fool to even try my hand at her. Besides, I am not really keen on being on the receiving end of her wand. I dare say she made your cravat crimson the other day—“

“And you did not *tell* me?”

“Oh, hell no. In fact, throughout the evening it turned several different shades of the rainbow. It was rather quite entertaining. I dare say your mother was the one to fix it before the evening was out.” Theo was positively cackling at Draco’s abuse at the hands of a witch half his size.

“I’ll have you know—“

Whatever argument he planned to sling at Theo was interrupted by a new arrival. Two late comers entered the room; the Marquis and Baron. Two peas in a pod and usually inseparable. Hermione’s friends. An element Draco had not anticipated. He had not thought of either of them, or truly recognized the fact that they were even at the estate.

Perhaps an oversight on his part. He really ought to pay more attention to the comings and goings of potential suitors to the witches in his circle. Potential suitors to Hermione. Not that she had ever shown interest in either them, or them in her. But the reality was that she had two prominent wizards in *her* circle, and it looked as the two lions had a bone to pick with

the snake. Harry swooped down on the table with barely concealed ire, smartly dressed in his robes. Just like Draco, he had come into his title well before his time. And just like Draco, Harry was a force to be reckoned with when he chose to apply pressure on others.

“It seems we have a discussion that is long overdue,” Harry said in a low tone as he dragged a chair over to their table. The Baron followed suit, both settling into their chairs across from them. Theo set his glass down, clearly intrigued by the turn of events. “About your sudden engagement with Hermione.”

“Lady Granger has agreed to be my wife—“

Ron interrupted him, “cut the centaur shit, Malfoy. She would never agree to that. She has made it clear, time and time again, that she does not want to wed.”

“What did you do to her? Hmm? How did you twist her arm—“ Harry started but Draco scoffed loud enough to momentarily draw attention to them from the other tables. He waited a moment for their eyes to return to their cards and games.

“I’ll have you know, I did not have to do anything to her.” He paused. “Nothing she didn’t like, at any rate.”

Ron nearly launched himself out of his seat as if he meant to throw himself across the table, coming up short when the tip of Draco’s wand pointed directly at him.

“I don’t know why you two idiots are acting so surprised by this. She has made it perfectly clear that you two and that red head chit are well aware of our arrangement. So what we have, or have not, done should be of no consequence to you. Sit down.” Draco waved his wand a little and the chair scraped loudly forward, ramming into the back of Ron’s knees. “If you must know, neither of us are pleased with this turn of events, but you should be. Her reputation will be spared. Isn’t that the entire purpose of your fit?”

“If you so much as harm her, I will see you on the fields, do you hear me?” Harry threatened, his hand briefly going to pat the inside pocket of his robes.

Draco tipped his head slightly at the not so thinly veiled threat. Dueling was banned, Muggle way with pistols or otherwise and it was not to be taken lightly. Severe injuries were common and oftentimes it was paired with death. Draco had never been in a duel, despite his reputation. Or because of it, he was not sure. Not many wished to go against a duke, but rather curry his favor.

“Watch your tone, Potter.” Was the only warning that Draco made in response.

Theo rose to his feet, motioning with a hand, “I think we are done here this evening, gentlemen. I’ll escort you two out and maybe show you the Chess Room? Yes, that sounds like a lovely way to relieve your ... *tension*; watching little army men beat the piss out of each other. Shall we?”

Draining the remainder of his glass, Draco climbed to his feet and slammed the glass down on the table with more force than he intended. “No, I’ll leave. I need some fresh air. Excuse

me.”

His friend moved as if to argue but Draco gave him a dark look. The other wizard tipped his head in acknowledgement, backing down. Stalking past the three of them, Draco left the study, Hermione’s friends warning and words echoing in his ear.

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The gardens were bustling with activities. Those who had not joined them in the study could be found outside enjoying the warm weather the summer had to offer. The sky was clear of clouds, the breeze filled with the scents of flowers and sweet grass. Couples danced across the open lawn with kites streaming behind them. Patronuses dashed about, frivolously chasing each other as their casters laughed. Some playfully dueled while others were merely enjoying an early morning stroll.

Draco tried to soothe his ire over the events that were unfolding, mulling over the days leading up to this engagement.

If he were honest with himself, it could have been completely preventable. By not even engaging in the wily Hermione. She was too bold, too crass, rising to the challenge he had given her when any other lady would have been offended and immediately backed down.

But perhaps that was what had drawn Draco to her. She was a fiery little wallflower, overshadowed by all the prim and proper roses.

But he had still not intended to cross this line with her. Neither of them had. They both had clear distaste for the idea of marriage.

His steps carried him away from the ruckus of the other guests and deeper into the maze of hedges, towards the large pavilion nestled in the center of it. A hippogriff fountain sat there, with water dancing merrily into the shallow pool, centered just before the stone structure with manicured vines growing and twisting along the pillars. Draco climbed the three steps into it, pausing as his eyes adjusted to the sudden shadows. In the center was a simple stone bench, overlooking the fountain just outside.

And there sat Hermione.

She had not noticed him, so engrossed in the book on her lap.

Her head was tipped slightly over the pages, one long curl coming to rest along her shoulder. Her shawl had slipped nearly free from her arms, one end trailing on the ground behind her. She appeared as a statue herself, the only indication she was living was the turn of the page. Draco knew he should announce himself lest he wished to raise her ire, but he held silent for a moment longer. She let out a soft, whimsical sigh as she lifted the book, and her eyes slid

over the top of it as if to gaze into space. Instead, they fell on him. Her dreamy expression immediately cleared and her spine straightened.

“Your Grace,” there was a slight scolding to her tone.

“Lady Granger,” Draco replied as he stepped forward. He motioned to the empty seat beside her and she inclined her head slightly. He doubted she was much concerned any longer for her reputation. They were to be wed anyway. “I should have known you would stow away in a pavilion.”

Marking her page with a finger, she turned slightly to look at him. One dark brow arched slightly in a mocking way that should have warned him of her pending tongue. “Folly. This is called a *folly*, My Lord.”

“I’m sorry, what is a folly?”

She motioned with the book to the space around them, “this structure. It’s called a folly, not a pavilion. It’s a gothic designed building that is reminiscent of an ancient Roman temple and serves no real purpose other than offering charming aesthetics to the grounds.”

“That’s a pavilion.”

“A pavilion tends to serve an actual purpose.”

“We are using this right now.”

“But it could not host a multitude of people. Besides, if you look there are Roman carvings into the pillars and in the ceiling,” Hermione lifted her chin slightly as her eyes danced upwards. He followed her gaze to the high ceiling. It was gracefully arched, with fading paint and worn designs. He had never noticed it before. But he had grown up with this structure being here before him, and it had been here before his father and before that. It was nothing special. Not to him, apparently. But Hermione? She was seeing it for the first time and with a fresh set of eyes. He wondered what else she saw that he did not.

“Hm, interesting. We’ve always called it a pavilion. I wonder what the historical property records deem it as,” he pondered aloud. He let his silver eyes drop back down to her face, which was still upturned as she admired the craftsmanship of the small building around them. “Perhaps we can look it up, when you’re Duchess.”

Her lips parted slightly as if to argue, but she instead turned to look at him. Her brows furrowed slightly and her gaze fell away to the book she held in her lap. Her finger still marked the page and she opened to it in a fidgeting motion. “I’m sorry.”

Draco was taken aback by the abrupt apology. “For what? Correcting me?”

There was a slight roll of her eyes, “no. For mucking up our arrangement like a drunken pixie. For making us enter a marriage neither of us want.”

He felt her words like a physical slap. Not at himself, but at the fact she felt the need to apologize because of it. True, he was not *pleased* with the turn of events. But he had not

changed his thoughts on her. She was a decidedly charming witch, despite what most considered to be flaws. He found them to be strengths.

He did not respond immediately, instead waiting for her to raise her eyes from the book to him. “Granger. You don’t need to apologize. Ever. It was bound to happen eventually. Maybe not to you, but to some witch. And you knew your leash was growing tighter as well. Eventually we both would be forced to wed someone we did not like.”

“But I’ve gone and ruined your chance to find a witch worthy of you,” she replied solemnly, her brown eyes dark with what he could only deduce to be remorse. “Someone from your station. Someone who would make you proud as your Duchess.”

To say he felt affronted by her remarks was an understatement. He rose to his feet, half tempted to just stride away from her and back into the manor in an attempt to soothe his ego. But he stayed, turning to look down at her. She looked taken aback as his sudden movement, as if she thought he would leave and surprised, just as much as he was, that he stayed.

“Do you really think of me that way? Like I give a centaurs bollocks about *stations* ? Would I have ever even looked in your direction if that was the case?” He scoffed her slight away as he leaned down and closed the book in her lap. His hand then caught her chin as she tried to look away. He hated to see her with uncertainty or questioning things. His tone softened as his thumb traced the curve of her lips.

“I chose you, Granger. Maybe not to wed, but that’s where we are now.”

Her lips parted and before she could offer some silly retort, he stooped down and claimed her lips as his own. He breathed deeply, drawing her up onto her feet and into his arms. She fell against his chest, her book tumbling to the ground beside them. His fingers skated along her jaw, tracing the soft curve of her throat as their kiss became hungry and desperate. Hermione’s hands, which had hung limp at her side, rose to his shoulders. Taller than her, she stretched and stood on her toes as his hand slid along the curve of her spine and molded her to him.

Salazar's beard, she fit so perfectly against him. She felt so small and slight in his arms but he knew she was anything but and could hex him faster than anyone he knew.

Draco also knew he couldn’t ravage her here, in the *folly*. But he wasn't quite ready to come up for air yet. She was his source of oxygen and he felt as if he were starving of it. He pivoted sharply on his heel so he could sit on the bench, dragging her down onto his lap until she straddled him. Her skirts bunched up around her knees, revealing an unequivocal view of her ankles and calves, glad in lace stockings.

Hermione clung to him, her hand coming to grip at the nape of his neck and brush the soft hair there. Fire danced along his skin at her shy touch, at the taste of her tongue as it met his. She had grown bold with their brief fondlings over the weeks. He felt his trousers growing tight with need, and she— perhaps unintentionally— wriggled herself against him in his lap. He felt the heat of her pressed against him. The soft mewl that left her lips only to be devoured by him. His hand skimmed along the tender bare skin of her knee, sliding up under the ruffles of her gown and towards her core.

His fingers found her, bare beneath her gown. Desire crashed over him at the realization, the tips of his fingers dancing over her soft mound of hair to her delicate folds.

“Oh, *Circe*,” he couldn’t help but exhale sharply as he gently teased her. “You’re so bloody wet already...”

She was going to be his undoing as she braced her knees on the edge of the bench, driving his hand closer to her very core. Her nails bit into his neck as she kissed him wantonly.

“Someone might see us,” Draco warned, the voice of reason.

Reason, which was quickly dissolving, as his finger continued to tease her in long and slow strokes. The sane part of his mind was questioning if it had been wise to enable her with knowledge she should not have yet. Perhaps giving her that book had been his undoing.

“Please, Draco,” Hermione’s plea was broken against his lips and he let out a groan, “we are to be wed anyway.”

The sound of his given name on her lips sent a shudder through his entire being, and his pulse leapt.

He eased his middle finger into her, feeling how wet and ready she was. So eager. But just to the first knuckle; she was tight. There was a slight shudder in her breath as her fingers flexed against his shoulder, and her body grew still. Her attention had shifted to the new sensation he was introducing, the intrusion of it. Turning his hand, his thumb found that tight nub of nerves. A sharp gasp left her lips as he circled it, using the distraction to press his finger deeper. He worked her slowly, listening to her and feeling her body react to his touch.

With her rising up on her knees, his lips found their way to the curve of her throat. He pressed open mouthed kisses to her racing pulse and he stroked her slowly with his finger, pressing deeper each time until his palm was flat against her.

Losing himself in her pleasure, he felt the moment she shattered. Her walls fluttered around his finger, gripping him as she came. Her hand clenched on his shoulder as her entire body seemed to hum, shuddering against his chest. Her thighs seemed to press together in a desperate attempt to push him away, or pull him closer.

The skin along her neck glistened with a faint sheen of sweat, one shoulder of her gown falling down to bare her skin to him. Draco pressed a kiss to her shoulder, closing his eyes as he breathed in her scent. He waited for her body to relax before easing his finger free.

She trembled slightly as leaned her forehead against his shoulder, visibly trying to catch her breath and likely gather her thoughts. Draco gently guided her legs off the length and turned her in his lap, tugging her skirts down to cover her.

“We should get back,” Hermione finally said into the crook of his neck. He felt her fingers smooth along the front of his robes.

“We should,” Draco agreed quietly. Neither of them moved.

“They’ll notice you’re gone,” she whispered. He knew that her mind was whirling, just like his was.

“Good thing I’m a Duke, then,” his hand rose to her face, fingers carding into her hair to tip her head back. He looked down at her, taking in her flushed face and wandering expression. “Because I could give a centaurs arse if they notice, and no one will dare say anything to me.”

Bluebells

~*~

Dearest Members of London;

I've returned from my venture to the countryside-

And do thine ears deceive me?

Is the Duke of Wiltshire truly ...Engaged ?

Have we missed the courtship,

or has he chosen someone a bit more...subtle?

Not all flowers that bloom are bold,

but all do bloom.

Has this one somehow managed to remain Hidden from all but the Duke?

Will we end the season with a wedding to win the hearts of everyone... Or in scandal?

The ever watchful,

Lady Quibbler

~*~

The stark contrast of the hustle and bustle of London to the quiet of the countryside was jarring. The peaceful chatter of the birds was gone, replaced with the clacking of wooden wheels and horses hooves on cobblestone. Serene parades through a garden was now instead crowded and filled with far more gossip than one would find in polite society.

Hermione would be lying if she said she almost missed the charm and solitude the Wiltshire Estate and Malfoy Manor had offered, despite the fact it had been overrun with members of the *ton*. There had been a serene quality to it, as large as it was.

Her stomach twisted and fluttered when she thought about how Malfoy Manor was to become her home. How all of that was one day soon, to be *hers*.

The carriage bounced along the road, the thestrals prancing along, unbothered by the weight of the carriage they pulled. Their harnesses were charmed, casting an illusion over their forms to give the appearance of a standard horse to any passing Muggle. Under any serious scrutiny the illusion would be broken, and most witches or wizards could see right through it regardless. It was more of a Muggle charm, similar to the disillusionment ones in place at the Theatre.

Across from her sat her mother and the Duchess, or soon to be Dowager Duchess, beside her. As soon as they had returned to the city, it had been a wave of chaos of wedding planning.

Hermione, thank Merlin's Beard, had to do little of it herself. Not that would have an inkling of where to start. She has never been an ordinary girl in that aspect- she had never dreamt of her wedding day. It seemed the older witches were more than eager to take it over. Her father, bless his kind heart, had been shocked at the news of her engagement. And mildly irked. The man rarely lost his temper but Hermione could tell there had been an internal battle going on; because Hermione had been so set on never marrying, and had seemingly thrown herself into an engagement without his permission.

And it was not as if her father had never met Draco, but it had been in passing and with barely a glance at that. He was dismissive of the Duke because he had thought his only, headstrong daughter, had the situation handled and never had intention to wed.

To be frank, Hermione was surprised her father had not threatened to duel the Duke for her honor or some silly thing. And by duel, he would have done so with pistols, not a wand.

They were currently headed to Diagon Alley Marketway, where a few boutiques awaited them. The flower shop was the first stop. The carriage rolled to a halt and her nose was assaulted with the heavy fragrances of multitudes of flowers lined up outside the florist as the footman opened the door. She took his hand as she stepped down, steps sliding into place gracefully. This part of London was for magical residence only; the street was bustling with activity. Witches and wizards apparating into the designated alleys, carriages of all sizes of quality being pulled by a menagerie of creatures. From horses to other thestrals, they pranced along. Street vendors set up booths to sell fresh baked goods, and owls fluttered to and from the owlry. A mix of melodies filled the air, from minstrels set up along the street.

The overall ambience of the market was enchanting.

Hermione looked up at the embossed wooden sign above the door before turning to wait for the matrons. They joined her and she was immediately ushered inside and away from the bevy of flowers on the street. Her mother slipped off to the next row, burying her nose into bundles of petals.

"Now if you wish to do an outdoor wedding, I would insist upon the North Garden terrace at Wiltshire, the roses are in full bloom and absolutely breathtaking." Narcissa was saying as she led the way into the florist. She paused at a row of small, pink flowers. Hermione was unsure of what they were, even as Narcissa stooped to smell them. "If you would like a traditional wedding inside a church, there is a lovely chapel at the south end of the property. Or, perhaps one of the churches in town? They would be far more accommodating for the guests—"

"I would rather *not* have many guests, My Lady," Hermione interrupted hastily. She had felt a slight ping of anxiety over the thought of people crowding into any sort of event and being unable to melt away. It was not that she was bothered by crowds. It was when those people were paying attention to *her*, and specifically being that there was no way for her to escape those ever watchful eyes.

Eyes that judged.

Criticized.

Wondered why *she*, a plain, low born witch was marrying a *Duke*.

It had already caused a ripple of gossip through the social circles. Many of which did not do her any favors. Indeed, several of them held a ring of truth, but Hermione would never admit to it and she knew that neither would Draco.

Hermione had thought that Pansy would have been at the head of the gossip for the simple reason of her dislike of Hermione, but instead she had been the one to shut most of it down. And harshly so. Perhaps because of what she had experienced herself at the hands of mindless gossip.

Narcissa trailed her fingers across some green leaves as she considered Hermione's words. Her face was empty of judgment of harsh criticism, and when she turned her attention to Hermione, her eyes were soft.

"Do forgive my presumptions, Miss Granger. I quite forget myself sometimes and that you are unlike the other witches. And, I must admit, with only a son— a rebellious one at that—I've never thought myself to be here and assisting in wedding preparations and planning."

Shifting beneath the other's kind gaze and apologetic words, Hermione fussed with straightening the flowers beside her in their vases.

"It's quite alright. I don't mind, truly..." Hermione tried to smooth over any ruffles she may have caused. "To be honest, I have to say that I never pictured myself here. Well, not *here*, per se." She waved a hand around the shop. "But being engaged. To be married. To a *Duke*, no less."

"As the youngest sister of three, the smallest dowry and a stubborn streak of my own, I can understand where you are coming from, Miss Granger. I also enjoyed losing myself in books instead of soirées. It is indeed an acquired taste and skill."

"You... So you like books?" It felt like a dumb question. Who didn't enjoy them?

Narciss smiled fondly, "why do you think the library is so vast and there are so many studies? I assure you it is not because of my late husband, Lucius. A charming wizard, yes. But his interests lie elsewhere— in quidditch and the phaeton races. He was quite a proficient gambler, which ultimately we believe led to his demise."

Realizing her words had taken a darker turn, Narcissa was quick to redirect the conversation. She gestured towards Hermione's mother, who was gathering individual flowers and creating a bundle of them. "Your mother has quite an eye for bouquets. Let's go take a gander at what she has gathered, hmm?"

They left the florists after a bit more pondering and shuffling flowers into various arrangements, from the classic rose paired with baby's breath, a plethora of peonies in various lovely shades of colors, and periwinkles and sweet peas. Hermione had settled with a classic approach, sticking with white roses, complemented with soft baby bluebells. She had chosen them on a whim, thinking they might compliment the grey in Draco's eyes. His mother had cast a curious and knowing glance at her upon her impulsive decisions. Narcissa

then promptly footed the hefty bill, waving away any complaints and refusal from Hermione or her mother.

They moved onto Madam Malkin's Robes and Gowns, where Narcissa had reserved a private window of time for Hermione to select a wedding gown. Upon entering, Hermione had moved to the rack of the prefabricated— and discounted— gowns, but Narcissa was quick to pull her away and towards the catalogs and bolts of fabrics.

“No, my dear. You are to be a Duchess. Only the finest and latest fashions will do for you.” Narcissa motioned towards a wedding gown on display in the window.

The seamstress that bustled over was eager to point out some of the latest wedding trends from France within the catalogs; the sketches depicted beautiful gowns of rich white linens and massive trains. Lace and satin. Pearls and expensive stitching. Some were embroidered and others not. Sheath gowns with flowing fabrics and others with massive bustles and layers.

There were no costs listed, either.

And Hermione hated to admit that many of these gowns did not quite fit her usual taste or style. They were beautiful, without a doubt, but a touch flamboyant. She was turning back through the book to the more subtle gowns. Not the mention that she knew her mother was trying to discreetly steer the pages and conversation to less prolifically expensive pieces. They were well off, yes, but even Hermione could not justify the expenses of what was before her. Wedding gown or not.

The seamstress had brought up some of the newest models for this year, various gowns and linens, and then ushered Hermione into one of the side rooms and onto the round step. A heavy curtain was shut behind them. Wearing only a slip, she was glad that the room they were in was private. The only two people beside the seamstress allowed into the room were the two mothers.

The current gowns were hung on display before them, Narcissa and her mothers looking at each of them and chattering in what sounded like a foreign language to Hermione.

The seamstress began to work right away, starting off with having Hermione trying on different gowns to find the right style she preferred. Eventually she settled on an elegant, empire waisted gown with lace, ruffled sleeves. The neckline was lower than she might have preferred, but it was appealing and to be honest, she felt quite... *pretty* in it.

A flush crept along her cheeks as she looked at herself in the mirror, her hands smoothing along the front of the bodice. For a moment, her mind wondered if the Duke might like her in it. Or out of it.

Her wandering thoughts were chased away as her mother appeared in front of her, face wild with excitement and tears pricking her eyes. Her hands were clasped and pressed to her lips in her barely contained excitement.

“You look breathtaking, Hermione.”

~*~

The resulting shockwave and gossip with his return to London had been expected. Those that had not heard news of his engagement directly from him at Wiltshire had heard of it in the gossip rags.

News spread like wildfire amongst the classes and circles.

Draco tossed aside the latest of Lady Quibbler's articles as he rose to his feet. His mother, usually residing in the country, had come to their London townhouse to help with the wedding planning. She had insisted that she handle it, and he needed only figure out whom his groomsmen would be and work on a guest list.

Letters were arriving by owl and foot, some asking for attendance and others filled with congratulations. Gifts of flowers and cigars piled into the foyer. It was all rather much. He had lost count of how many owls had shown up, some loitering in their small owlry and upsetting his own owls.

Then again, it wasn't every day that a rake was turned honest, a Duke to wed.

Especially since Draco had proclaimed he would never wed.

Expecting the tailor to arrive to fit him for a suit, Draco left his study and headed down the hall and towards the foyer. He had to pass his mother's sitting room, and he paused briefly at the sound of familiar, feminine voices.

He crept— not really, because a Duke does not do such things— towards the door. It was ajar. It was hardly to be considered spying if the door was already *open*, right?

Draco peered through the door at the sound of his mother's voice, followed by the Lady Granger. Of course, he had expected the two witches to come together and begin wedding planning and preparations. It was likely nothing that would interest him. But then another woman spoke; Hermione.

That did interest him, he realized.

Turning his body slightly, he was able to adjust his angle of the room. The Lady Granger was seated on one of the chairs, a teacup in hand. His mother was speaking to Hermione now, motioning for her to join her in front of a gilded standalone mirror. It was clear that his betrothed was hesitant to do so, but rose to her feet. Narcissa positioned the younger witch in front of the mirror that stood in the corner, fussing for a moment. She then turned and opened a wooden box that sat on a side table, lifting a silver necklace with delicate cut emeralds.

From here, Narcissa's words were unclear but she spoke directly to Hermione as she stood behind her. With nimble fingers, she slipped the necklace onto the other witch's neck, latching the clasp at the back of her neck.

Hermione's hand lifted to touch the emerald stones that now encircled her delicate throat as Narcissa's hand came to her shoulders.

Draco knew the instruction his mother gave; *stand tall, hold your chin up. You're a Duchess now*. She had given them to him when his father had passed and he had become the Duke.

And for a moment, she looked as if she had stepped into this role that she was being forced into. A role she had clearly stated she never wanted.

Doing as she was instructed, Hermione straightened and her eyes lifted to appraise herself in the mirror. It was in that moment that her gaze traveled and met his in the reflection. Her lips parted ever so slightly, but she made no inclination to give him away. He felt a low burning heat crawl through him, his heart beating perhaps a touch too loudly.

He knew he should announce his presence at this point. It would be the proper thing to do. But they both kept their silence; he was a rake, after all. And the way her cheeks tinted a faint shade of pink indicated she was humoring the same thoughts.

Who would have ever thought that a notorious rake with a reputation like his would ever deign to spy on a prissy little wallflower such as herself?

Letting his gaze drift lazily from hers, they briefly fell to her lips. She fleetingly bit at the plush curve of her bottom lip, and he, for a moment, wished it was him catching it between his teeth. His eyes wandered, ever lower. Tracing the path of the necklace across her chest, over the subtle curves of her breasts until his gaze fell away.

A smirk touched his lips as he tipped his head before retreating, hoping he had left her as bothered as she seemed to have done to him.

~*~

"It's a family heirloom, in case you were curious, your Grace," a familiar voice chimed from the door of his study, followed by the sound of the wood shutting behind Hermione as she entered into his space.

She had not knocked or asked permission, but Draco would be a fool to think she ever would.

He looked up from the Wiltshire record's book before him, quill poised in mid sentence. "I beg your pardon, Miss Granger?"

Hermione waltzed into the room with a slow stride, snapping open the fan that hung at her wrist. She held it up to cover her bosom, fanning it quickly. Little wispy curls danced about

her face as she peered at him from over the brim. He couldn't help but be a touch amused at her unusual antics.

"Don't play coy with me, Your Grace," Hermione cooed and he had to smother an amused smirk. She was utterly terrible at this but he was not about to ruin the game. "I saw you *spying* on me."

He feigned innocence, "I dare say you are imagining things, Miss Granger. Perhaps you should see a healer?"

She crept ever closer, fanning herself more vigorously as she rounded the edge of his desk. "I am feeling... *feverish*."

"Oh? Let me feel," Draco pushed his chair back and tapped his knees, "Have a seat, My Lady."

Hermione obligated him as she snapped her fan shut and set it onto his desk before settling onto his lap. She wriggled against him, as if trying to get comfortable and he had to bite back a groan as she ground down onto his member. As soon as she had finished her torture, he lifted a hand, touching the back of his knuckles to her forehead.

"Hmm," Draco pondered as he slowly trailed his knuckle down across her temple, tracing the arch of her cheekbone. Her cheeks were indeed flushed, but not from any fever. Turning his hand, his thumb followed the curve of her bottom lip. The one that had teased him. Her lips parted at his touch and he couldn't help but steal a kiss.

The flames fanned between them instantly, her fingers coming up to mimic his as they traced the planes of his face. She was pressing herself close to him, her free arm winding around his neck. He didn't know if he should curse or praise himself for creating such a wanton little thing. She was melting into his arms.

Breaking the kiss for a moment, Hermione took a shuddering breath as she looked at him. Her brows furrowed slightly over eyes that were darkened with desire. Her lips, swollen from their kiss.

"I don't want to wait any longer," she said shakily.

"We only have to wait a little bit until we are wed—"

She shook her head sharply, her gaze determined. "The first time we spend together should not be because we are married. I've never wanted that, nor did you. It should be because we both want it. And I'm ready. I want you right now."

Into The Snake's Den

With a *crack*, his arms had tightened around her waist and there was a rush of magic— a pulling at her navel as they apparated out of the study and into a bedroom. His hands were firm against her hips as he tossed her onto the bed. The wind rushed from her lungs as she bounced, hands fumbling to straighten herself. Hermione shot a glare at Draco as she reached up to push some curls from her face and he for a moment cracked a cocky grin.

She half expected him to pounce on her, but instead he held himself back. He was merely looking down at her with a hungry gaze, as if he was undressing her with his eyes. He had never seen her naked before and she felt a flush of heat crawling across her skin. Draco lowered himself onto the bed beside her, his lips finding hers for a searing kiss. Hermione reached for her skirts, to pull them up and usher him down to her but he reached a hand down to hers to stop her.

“Not like that, Granger.” He said against her lips.

She obliged and let her hand fall away, and to her surprise he released her skirts. His hand danced up along her body, fingers tracing the dip of her waist, over the swell of her breasts. Before she could think about what he was doing, the mattress dipped as he slipped away from her and pulled her to her feet.

Hermione stood before him, feeling small beneath his gaze. Draco moved to stand behind her; deft fingers swept along the bare curve of her shoulder to the cap of her sleeve. A gentle push and the fabric fell away to catch at her elbow. He repeated the motion on the other side. Instinctively, her hands caught the gown at her breasts before it could fall away. Cool air kissed her skin as his hands traced the back of her gown across her shoulder blades.

A tug of shyness filled her when he rounded to stand in front of her. Looking up at him from beneath her lashes, she took in his features. The way the candlelight danced across the planes of his face and softened it. How the grey of his eyes turned to mercury amidst the flickering of the flame.

As if he could sense her hesitancy, a hand rose to catch her chin. Fingers traced her jaw, his rings cool against her flushed skin as he tipped her face towards his. Draco's kiss was gentle and coaxing; a feather light brush of his lips against hers. He made no demands as the fingers of his free hand danced across her bare collarbones and across the swell of her breasts. They met the top of her gown and she loosened her hold on it, letting it fall away. The fabric whispered as it met the floor, pooling around her feet.

She wore nothing but a chemise beneath.

Her nipples were taunt, peaked against the cool air of the room. They grew harder, expectant as he stepped back to look at her.

A sense of self-preservation burned through Hermione but she kept her hands at her sides as he released her chin, his gaze raking down her chest. His hand slipped to cup the underside of

her breast, the touch sending a shiver through her body.

His thumb swept upward, teasing the silken fabric against her skin as he just brushed the hard peak.

A part of her wanted to break the tension that was winding impossibly tight in the air between them with some smart remark, but Hermione instead bit her lower lip when Draco tugged the top down. Cool air kissed her aching nipple and a desperate whine left her lips. She wanted *him* to touch her *just there*, just as she had seen in that blasted book. She pressed her knees together as a dull throbbing heat grew between her legs at the thought of his mouth on her.

She felt unfairly exposed in comparison to him. Draco still wore his entire garb. A perfectly tied cravat at his throat, a pressed and fine black shirt beneath a tailored jacket— far too much, in her opinion.

Hermione reached a hand up to the silken cravat, her fingers mapping each fold of the silk until she found the end. “It’s my turn,” she whispered softly

With a tug, she freed the cravat from his throat. His hand that had caressed her stopped; his pupils grew wide as he watched her.

The offending piece of fabric fell away and she fumbled with the buttons of his jacket, reaching up to push it off his shoulders. He shrugged to aid her, but nothing more. Next she tugged his shirt free of his trousers, working on the buttons with nimble fingers. With each one undone, more of his chest was revealed to her hungry gaze. She had been starving, Hermione realized, to see *him*. Her fingers smoothed across the vee of his throat, tracing along his collarbones as she once again pushed the shirt from his torso.

Last was his pants.

Blast him for arching a brow at her, his lips twitching in an amused smirk.

“Go on,” he drawled, unmoving. Clearly he was not going to aid her this time.

She had taken a step back to look at him, her heart hammering against her ribs as her mouth grew dry. Draco was... Beautiful. His skin was like carved marble; a smooth alabaster white, except for faint muted scars that crossed his chest. She wanted to ask him how he had been injured— but that was for another time.

Her eyes drifted lower, following the taut vee that dragged her gaze towards his pants.

“Your boots,” was all she managed to say as she pointed at his feet.

“I’m not against you on your knees in front of me, Granger,” Draco purred, his voice a taunting caress.

A shiver ran along her spine as she took a step forward, intending to take him up on it when his hands rose to catch her face. He drew her lips to his in a gentle kiss. A soothing one, as if he knew he had to ease her nerves.

Before she could stop him, his hands were on her hips and guiding her back to the bed. She felt the mattress hit her calves and her stomach fluttered. In one smooth motion, she found herself once more on her back, her hair fanning around her as she looked up him. He held himself above her, pressing featherlight kisses along her jaw to her throat.

“I have you all to myself for an eternity, it seems. I can indulge my pleasures then. But first...” his lips pressed against her collarbone, “I need to break you in.” A tremble rippled through her. He kissed just on her breastbone. “Let you adjust to being claimed.” His lips teasing across the swell of her breasts, and then the other. “Pleasure you...”

His words held such promise that a shudder rippled through her to her very core. He let out a low growl and she felt cool air kissing her flushed skin between her legs. She burned and felt damp with desire. The simple camisole pulled to her waist, Draco’s mouth moved to press open mouthed kisses along her navel. Her hip bones. Her hips were rising into each press of his lips against her skin as she let her legs fall open. He had ignited the flame of passion inside her, heat curling through her very core. She knew what she wanted; Hermione wanted his mouth on her.

“Please,” the plea fell from her lips as she writhed slightly. She swore she could feel his catlike smirk at the desperate edge to her word.

Before Hermione could even draw in a breath, his lips were on her— his tongue lapping at that junction that ached. She could feel each pass of his tongue along her core as he parted her folds, tasting her greedily.

Hermione could not tell if it was his moans that reverberated through her body or his. He was pushing her towards that climax, her body so eager for it. White danced behind her lids, the intensity causing her to grip the blankets. Just as she was about to crest, his mouth left her.

A whine fell from her lips at the denial, but it quieted as she looked up at him. He was kicking away his boots— or perhaps he had already done so— and his trousers now fell away.

She could not help but gaze at him through hooded eyes. All of him. So foreign to her and yet... she wanted him. Every inch. She could not fathom how Draco would fit, surely he could not, but Hermione didn’t care. She wanted to feel him.

As if sensing her growing need, Draco crawled on top of her. In a flash he was suddenly kissing her, his lips tasting sweet from her arousal. He held himself above her, hovering so close that she could feel the heat of him. Hermione knew she needed to feel him atop of her; wanted his weight to pin her to the bed. Lifting her knees so her feet were on the mattress, she arched her back until she felt *him*. His hard length teasing where his mouth had been moments before. Her core tightened in anticipation and desire, the primal need overcoming that shyness that had inhabited her before.

Draco released a guttural groan into her mouth as he let his hips follow her down onto the mattress, resting just some of his weight on her. His cock was now nestled between her thighs, hard and heavy. Hot. Silken smooth. She wondered what it would feel like to touch, to taste.

She gripped his wrists beside her head as she let his tongue sweep into her mouth, their kiss desperate until they had to come apart for air.

It was then that he looked down at her, concern shadowing his eyes for the first time. A shift of his hips, and his hand went between their bodies. Hermione could feel him guiding his cock to her entrance; the head felt thick as it pressed against her. Impossibly wide. Swollen. It was then that she was grateful for him giving her that book. For giving her the knowledge to prepare for this invasion. She knew it would be uncomfortable at first.

A slight nod of her head was the assurance he needed.

And Draco kissed her again as he eased himself inside. In and in and deeper. The stretch around his cock was searing. The air seemed to become trapped in her lungs as she focused on the sensation happening, but his kiss drew her back to him. Distracting her as he eased into her.

Hermione didn't think it was possible, but eventually every inch was seated deep within her. she felt impossibly full. Her core ached dully around him, and it wasn't until she felt his thumb slip across her cheek that she realized she had cried.

He was murmuring sweet nothings, quiet affirmations that fell on her deaf ears. She was too focused on the feeling of her body slowly easing, the tension, the pain, fading. Just slightly. He must have felt the shift as well, because he eased himself from her and then back in. Slow, shallow thrusts. Enough to cause a brief heat of pain, but with each stroke it lessened. And with each press of his cock into her, her pleasure heightened. Her arousal, which had been dampened, returned in full force. Her knees shook as he settled his body onto hers, his mouth hot as he pressed demanding kisses along her flushed skin. As if he were apologizing for the pain, no matter how brief.

Soon the little pained whimpers from her were replaced with whines and moans. Each thrust forced a rush of air from her lungs. Her fingers carded into his hair as she clung to him, needing to feel every inch of him as much as he felt her. Her body moved with his, the ancient primal dance woven into every fiber of her being.

Pressure was building within her with each stroke, with each touch of his lips, and with each graze of his teeth. His hands had moved to hold onto her, to mold her to his body. Hermione felt winded beneath his body while simultaneously being enthralled by it. She thought he could go no deeper until his hands kneaded her arse as he curved her hips into his, slotting their bodies even more impossibly closer. She felt him so intensely that surely he had to be within her very womb.

A flutter filled her as she gripped him in every way possible, white hot pleasure flashing through her. Stars danced behind her lids and she knew she was unraveling; it was not an instant climax as it had been before, but a wave of pleasure she had every intention of riding out. It washed over her, ebbing with the lingering pain only to be overpowered again by another wave of pleasure.

Draco kissed her desperately one last time before he tore himself away, pulling his body from hers as he rolled away.

Hermione herself was breathless as she felt her body coming down from that intense high. The air of the room cooled her overheated and sweaty skin. Her legs trembled as she let them lower to the mattress and she reached for her camisole; it felt silly to be modest now but her nipples ached in the cool air.

A moment passed and Draco rolled back to her, reaching up to brush a curl from her sweat covered brow. He gave her a mysterious smile before he rose from the bed. A part of her had wanted him to stay— but she knew they had been gone far too long.

She sat upright in the bed, wincing at the sharp stab of pain between her legs and the ache in her pelvis. She stared for a moment at the stain on the sheet beneath her; she had expected it, thankfully. Hermione felt only a slight pang of terror at the sight of the evidence of her virginity but it was quickly extinguished with her brain sweeping in to remind her that was normal.

Silently thanking the Gods for giving her the foresight to read that book cover to cover, Hermione slipped from the bed to find her clothes, Draco aiding her to redress. She felt no undue awkwardness, for which she was grateful.

They dressed in relative silence, exchanging glances and small smiles. In only a few minutes, they were decent and able to slip from the room— leaving a couple minutes apart so as to not raise suspicion.

There Is Always Tea

Hermione was not quite sure how she *felt* after that stolen moment with the Duke. *Draco*. Her future husband and betrothed. She had not had the time to fully process it. She had simply hastily dressed, tidied her hair and returned to meet with the other two witches.

Had she never read that book he had given her, she likely would never have known about such things until her wedding night. She would have been blind sided by it. Her mother, loving as she was, had never so much as hinted at what occurred between a man and a woman. Hermione was not daft so she knew of kissing and hand holding- and she had witnessed things on the farm. But it has never prepared her for *this*.

The rush of emotions. That extreme high as if she were standing on a ledge and about to fall. How small she has felt, and how empty she now felt after they had parted ways.

Even the book had not prepared her for *that*.

And she felt... dizzyingly exuberant.

The book has warned that there may be discomfort as well, but assuming the damn thing had been written by a man it was likely the author had no clue to what extent that was or just how that pain truly felt. And it was an indescribable pain; not wholly unbearable but not quite something that could be so easily ignored. It had felt like a great pressure inside her, a burning hot pushing and tugging.

The walk back to where the witches waited for her was mildly laborious. The muscles just at the apex of her thighs burned with a dull heat. Each step seemed to draw them taunt, like a band. There was a hollow ache inside her. An uncomfortable one, and not like she has experienced before during her monthly flow.

Was *that* normal?

Hermione has remained silent most of the evening after that. Withdrawn into her own mind as she replayed everything; her stomach grew tight with that familiar sensation that she now realized was only in accompaniment with thoughts of Draco. Of what he did to her and how he made her feel.

The ride home was also silent.

Her mother, thankfully, seemed not to notice and if she did, was atoning it for Hermione being socially drained.

She was eager to climb into her bath as soon as she reached her room. The silence there was a welcomed one. She had discarded her gown onto a pile on the floor and a flick of her wand had the copper tub filling with steaming water. A brief pause before the mirror and Hermione looked at herself, naked before it. She felt tender and sore. And *different*. Not negatively so

but she did. But there was no outward sign of this change that had occurred. She felt no disappointment at the loss of her virginity, and truly she never had given it much thought.

Her body looked the same to her eyes. Perhaps her lips were a bit swollen and her cheeks a bit pink. But nothing out of the ordinary.

It was when she was climbing into the tub that she noticed the only thing that denoted what had occurred; a faint stain of rusty red on the inside of her thighs, just at the junction. It only gave her a momentary pause. She had read that in the book as well and for a moment, the thought of bleeding from a union had terrified her. But then her rational mind reminded her that she bled every month, anyway. That this was no different and it would only occur this one time.

The heat of the water soothed her aches away. It lapped at all the places Draco had touched.

Hermione closed her eyes as she leaned her head back, reminiscing. She had no regrets, and why would she? Either way, the union of their bodies had been inevitable. It had been by choice. And she was glad of it.

~*~

“Tell me what it was like!” Ginny whispered into Hermione’s ear over the chatter of the other guests.

Seated at the table for lunch, it was the first time they had seen each other since the manor in the country. And of course, Hermione had wasted no time telling her dear friend about her stolen moment with the Duke. About how she had lost her virginity. It had felt wrong to withhold such a thing from her friend— and Hermione had been positively dying to boast over the experience.

That had been only moments ago, just before they had been ushered from the sitting room to the dining room. The long table was piled with a copious amount of food and candles swayed overhead. As always, it was an elegant affair.

Hermione cast a glance along the table before shooting her friend a look, “not *now*. ”

Heaven forbid someone were to overhear the debauched details.

“After lunch, then.” Came the determined response.

Hermione did not respond as she took a bite of the slice of apple placed on her plate. She would let her friend stew a bit longer before giving her the full details- if at all. She was unsure if she should or if it would be proper. Did women do such a thing? And not to mention, how could she describe it without it sounding horrifying? How could Hermione properly articulate what she had *felt*? The emotions and sensations that had flooded her every sense until she had been nothing more than a shattered star?

Her eyes traveled down the table and met with the wizard in question. There was a devious twinkle in his eyes, as if he was aware of what she had been thinking. Her cheeks grew warm and she hastily looked away as he lifted his cup in a silent toast to her.

Just because they were now formally and publicly engaged to be wed did not mean she was about to start treating him differently or, Heaven forbid, start simpering over him like every other witch. To her mild annoyance, his engagement to her had not seemed to have hindered other witches' attention. In fact, it had become more obvious. Some went as far as to boldly touch his arm while fluttering their lashes at him. As if they somehow still stood a chance.

Not that Hermione noticed such things.

She simply did not care.

It was truly just entertaining.

There was a sharp pain in her chest as she stared down at her plate, pretending to remain unbothered.

"Hermione," a soft airy voice drifted to her ears as Luna sat down beside her with a grace she seemed to flawlessly possess. She gave Hermione a soft smile, "I've heard the wonderful news."

"That the poor, insignificant, manipulative little me somehow managed to bag myself a Duke despite the fact we are terrible for each other and have never spoken before this year?" Hermione had already heard the gossip and insipid murmurs. She must have brewed a love potion, or used a mind manipulation spell, or even the *imperio*.

None of which was true and did not even sound like what she would do; had anyone bothered to know her, this would have been obvious.

Luna shook her head, the delicate coil of silvery blonde hair swaying over her shoulder. "That you are to be married to the Duke, yes. That is such lovely news to hear. I'm so glad to hear you've changed your mind on marriage. I knew you two were meant to be together; you are the light to his dark."

Hermione leveled a look at the blonde, unwilling to decipher her words, "I have not changed my mind on it. This is more... an arrangement of circumstance that benefits us both."

"A conveniently timed one," Luna stated with a delicate sip of her wine.

Making no reply, Hermione pushed her food around her plate. She knew people were watching her every move. Scrutinizing her. How could *she*, a *nobody*, win over the solitary and cold Duke? A mere wallflower caught the eye of a man so close to princedom, when almost every woman simpered at his feet and catered to his every whim and he ignored them- yet she had remained aloof and cold to him.

While the gossip mill rarely caught her attention, it also rarely involved her. Being on the brunt end of it was jarring. She swore she caught pitying looks from Pansy. And Hermione

noticed Harry looking at *Pansy* as well; in fact, the pair had exchanged glances several times. Was this situation a reminder of what they had endured and lost? Made even more bittersweet as neither had never wed.

Pansy had merely dealt with the fallout rather than being forced to marry against her wishes. Rather than make it seem as if she meant to trap Harry, she had taken the brunt of the gossip, and only walked away due to her position in society.

Was that what people whispered about Hermione? That she had *trapped* the Duke? A glance at him and he appeared unbothered. Completely *untrapped*. Flirting with the witches around him. Women who were more his equals than she was; at least, station wise. Hermione could feel his boredom seeping down the table at the droning of Katie about cross-stitching, his complacent smiles he cast on the simpering Millicent. She could, she *should*, save him from them. They were to be wed, she should be utterly offended by their behavior after all.

Instead she sipped from her glass and turned away.

And she realized that she was being cast scolding, disapproving looks from both Harry and Ron. She had not spoken to them since their time in the countryside at Malfoy Manor. In fact, she had actively avoided them at all costs. Hermione had been aware that they would frown upon the arrangement. They had already been unhappy over her plan to become his Mistress, but now for her to be his *wife*? She could imagine their complaints now.

A bunch of mothering, meddling hens, is what those two were.

Hermione turned away from them as well.

For a moment, she felt at odds. Not as she was used to, but it was a... newfound feeling. Of being studied, the weight of unkind eyes and thoughts. A part of her, the morbidly curious part, wished she possessed the ability to wander into their very minds with Legilimency.

But some skills were better left to others, she supposed.

She finished her meal, unscathed and unburnt. No one but Ginny and Luna spoke to her, for which she was grateful. She wished to enjoy her remaining few weeks in relative solitude. Until at which time she would become a Duchess.

They were once again at the Parkinson townhome, one of the first places she had run into the Duke all those weeks ago at the beginning of the season. Those first few interactions with him were seared into her mind. Her feet carried her away from the chitter chatter, finding comfort in the path towards the library. How many times had she stolen away, just like this? The library greeted her just as it always had; quiet and dark. Empty. That delightful, soothing scent that old books offered; a faintly musky odor of parchment and vanilla, surrounded her.

She slipped her wand from her pocket- having decided against jamming it into her hair like she usually did due to the fact she surmised that Narcissa would not approve- and illuminated the library wordlessly. Shadows crept along the floor as she paced into the room. For a moment, she was transported back in time, just a few months ago. When she had been a clueless, innocent witch. No thoughts of marriage or temptations edged her thoughts.

In a few weeks she would become a Duchess.

Her mind had not processed this; in fact, it seemed to refuse to. Because it was not something she had ever wanted. And she was.. unsure on how she did feel about it. Hermione had been comfortable in accepting his terms for their arrangement to gain her financial freedom and avoid the expectations of women in her society. But now... *now* she was stepping right into the position she had wished to avoid.

The light of her wand slid long shadows along the floor, her skirts whispering against the wood with each step. Her eyes roved along the books.

As a Duchess, would she be able to sneak away like this? Or would she be trapped out *there* , forced to endure and conversate with people who only wished to be her friend because of her station?

“Funny, isn’t it?” A familiar voice drawled, sending a tingle up along her spine.

Hermione turned on her heels slowly to look at Draco, where he leaned against the doorway. His blond hair was rumpled, as if he had raked his fingers through it. He looked just as he always did; unbothered and put together. Aloof. Mildly formidable, to those who did not know him. Annoyingly cocky with that half tilt of his lips into that smirk he wore.

“What is it that you find funny, Your Grace?” She asked quietly.

Suddenly, she was unsure how she should respond to him. They had merely gone their separate ways the day before; was that how it always would be? A quick tussle in the sheets and then they would return to their lives? As a mistress, it had seemed far more appealing. There had been no expectations but pleasure. But suddenly... Hermione realized she now had to face the Duke and Draco as one. There was no separating the two any longer.

Draco pushed himself away from the door to slowly prowl into the room with that familiar predatory gait of his. His eyes never left hers as he moved closer.

Now, she recognized that hungry look in his gaze for what it was. Desire. She felt a heat crawling through her at its intensity.

She squared her shoulders as he approached her, a slow smirk creeping onto his lips. “That only so many weeks ago, we once bumped into each other in a library much like this. In fact, I do believe this is the library I nicked that little book that I gave you. Remember the one? And had we not, we would not be here now.”

He was close as he circled her, his heat seeming to radiate from his body. But only just close enough so the trailing hem of her gown brushed his polished shoes as he swept behind her.

“Who would have, *could have*, imagined such an outcome?” He continued and she imagined him waving his hand with a flourish, his silver rings flashing from the light of her wand.

“Is that regret I hear, Your Grace?”

He shook his head as he came back around to stand in front of her. “Not at all. A mild... fascination, but not regret. Merely pondering how our paths have crossed and continue to cross. How our terribly laid out plan has transformed into *this*, a betrothal.”

Hermione let out a sigh. She was in no mood for games. “Why are you here?”

She had wanted to be alone. From *everyone*, but especially him. She had yet to decide how much liked him as it was; tolerating him for a romp in the sheets was one thing. But as a wife?

“Same as you, I presume.” He pointed out quietly as his grey eyes swept across her face. Despite all his snark, she did not feel the judgment she so commonly felt from others. “To get away and find some peace.”

Hermione let her wand hand lower to her side and the shadows grew around them. “I’ve yet to understand how you, a Duke, can just slip away whenever you wish.”

He shrugged as he plucked at a string upon his sleeve, “because as a Duke I can do mostly whatever it is I wish.”

“How fortunate for you,” Hermione replied with an exaggerated eye roll.

His attention returned to her, “you will be a Duchess. Or did you forget?”

Hermione mimicked his shrug with one of her own, “as titillating as that sounds, I do not look forward to—“

“You daft fool, it means you can do whatever it is *you* wish and no one is going to say anything about it. You might even be forgiven for casting a hex or two if they should be so unwise to open their maws.” His fingers fondled his cravat and she wondered if he had ever realized it was her that had changed it to be different colors all those weeks ago. Maybe he had never realized at all; the wizard seemed to have a new cravat every time she met him. “I swear, you were rumored to be the Brightest Witch and yet—“

She had lifted her wand slightly at his words, her brows lifting as if to dare Draco to finish his sentence. And she paused; in that moment she realized she had never truly seen the Duke wield his own wand or use much magic. Perhaps because he had grown up surrounded by it, that it was just another commonplace for him. Whereas for her... she felt woefully inadequate suddenly.

“I had never accounted for becoming a Duchess, or anyone’s wife,” she replied quietly. “I’ve never bothered to look into what a woman of station can or cannot do. It was never my intention to be in this position.”

“I—“ Draco started to speak but he was interrupted.

“First, you two are found *alone* at the library in your home, but *again?!* ” Harry swept into the room, his brows furrowed over his eyes as he glared at Draco. “This makes this how

many times you two have been *alone*? Apparently tarnishing her honor is not enough for you, is it?”

Hermione bristled at the words as Draco turned slowly to look at their interloper. “Must you stick your nose where it does not matter *all the damned time*? Besides, it does not matter anymore. We are to be wed—“

“Only *after* you nearly ruined her, Malfoy,” Harry looked positively livid as he prowled closer, his hands flexing at his sides. “I couldn’t help but notice you eyeing her up like some chunk of prized meat—“

“*Meat*? That does not sound flattering at all.” Hermione muttered.

Harry continued over her interruption, “— during the meal and I barely was able to stop the gossip mill before it even started churning. I don’t want or need my friend being called a *harlot* before she is even married.”

“I haven’t heard that particular—“ Hermione started to argue but Harry’s attention snapped to her.

“Of course you wouldn’t. It’s not the witches who are calling you that. Though, I’ve been told they are saying other things about you. It’s the men, Hermione. Suddenly you’ve made yourself available and the crows come squawking as if they have some chance at bedding you.”

She felt her mind shudder at the words; she had never taken into account that the wizards may gossip as well. That while witches may be insipid vipers, men are snakes just as well—though their goal was far darker than putting her at odds with the community. With her recent experience with Draco at the back of her mind, she suddenly was aware of what their words implied and she felt a sliver of ice travel through her.

Instead, she turned her attention to another part of his statement, “and who told you about the witches? Ginny? Luna? Or was it Pansy?”

His cheeks heated slightly at the last word and she scoffed.

“You claim to be some protector of my honor and yet you were sitting at the table, just as I was, flapping your lashes at her like it was some mating call. What of *her* honor, hmm? You’ve already ruined it once. So don’t pretend you are perfect and try to make *me* feel bad for finally making something of my life by trapping a Duke.”

“I’m not sure if that’s the word you should be using here or not—“ Draco muttered from the side of his mouth.

“Shut it, Draco,” Hermione snapped at him before she glared at Harry again.

Draco held up hand, “apologies. Continue tearing him a new arsehole. I’ll wait.”

“I’ve never done anything in my life that I did not wish to do, Harry.” She had stepped away from Draco with each word until she stood nearly toe to toe with her friend, scowling up at

him.

Harry looked down at her, a frown on his lips, his voice quiet. “That doesn’t make things okay.” His eyes flicked past her and he now spoke to Draco. “I will see you at dawn. Clynwood park. We will settle this then.”

The only response that came from Draco was the slight tip of his head at the words and Hermione turned sharply to look at the Duke, a frown on her face. “He doesn’t mean—“

Draco’s face was grim and drawn. He did not look at her. “A duel.”

~*~

Draco tracked down Theo amongst the gathering, honing in on the sound of his friend's voice through the hum of chatter. His pulse sounded loudly in his ear, echoing his footsteps. Most people parted as he strode across the room and he knew his face was set in a scowl by how quickly they fell away; no one dared to step into his path or try to talk to him.

“Theodore, I need to talk to you,” Draco said as he reached his friend. He did not acknowledge his partner; he recognized her as Hermione’s friend, Ginny. The red head looked at him with wide eyes, glancing between the two of them.

“It seems I’m out of wine, I’ll just...” Ginny said as she excused herself. She had not been holding a wine glass and Draco could only appreciate her stepping away.

Theo turned his attention to Draco, his smile fading as he looked at him. *Really* looked at him. “Someone pissed in your oats.”

“Not here,” Draco grumbled lowly.

He jerked his head towards the foyer. Theo followed him wordlessly, his face taut with curiosity but biting his tongue from asking what he wanted to. They stood in silence in the foyer while Draco’s carriage was brought around, the four black stallions pulling it prancing and tossing their heads. Another time he may have admired how handsome the team looked in their new harnesses. But his mind was elsewhere.

They climbed into the carriage in silence. It wasn’t until they were rumbling down the street, the carriage jostling along the cobblestones and the sound of voices outside filled the air that Theo finally spoke.

“What happened?”

“The Marquis challenged me to a duel.” Draco said as he peered out the window.

“*Potter?*” Theo asked incredulously.

“The very same,” came Draco’s reply. He let his gaze slip to his friend. “I said nothing in response. He gave me a time and place—“

“Why would he challenge you?”

“For Granger’s honor, it seems.”

Theo let out a bark of a laugh as he leaned back in his seat, his eyes shining momentarily with mirth. “I realize they are friends, but does he not realize she is capable of handling herself?”

A slight smile touched Draco’s lips at the thought but he did not respond to it. Instead, he said, “I would like you to be my second.”

The atmosphere in the carriage grew somber as his friend looked at him. For a moment, Draco wondered if Theo would turn him down. He had no obligation to do this, but it was commonplace to bring a second to a duel; either as a witness or...Draco tried not to think of it.

Theo shrugged his narrow shoulders, “I suppose it’s a good thing that Potter excels in disarming spells and you—“

Draco shot him a dark look. “I do *not* excel in the dark arts, Theodore. And I would rather not bring it up again.”

Holding up his hands was the closest thing to an apology Theo would offer, “very well. I’ll come with you to your townhome and we can prepare for the duel. When is it?”

“Tomorrow morning. Dawn.”

Theo let out a groan, “bloody hell, so much for drinking then, aye? Why couldn’t he pick brunch at least?”

They both knew why; dueling was outlawed and those that participated in it would have to do it when no one might stumble upon them. As such, most duels occurred before the town awoke or just as everyone was going to bed. And it was easier to aim in the light than the dark. His stomach turned slightly as he turned his attention to the city outside the carriage. Draco did not want to think about it, but he knew using magic was inevitable. And he could not simply ignore the demand for a duel, it would utterly ruin him. Duke or not, that was not something he could simply walk away from.

A Flick of the Wrist

Chapter Notes

I feel like my friend Annka will be messaging me first thing in the morning.

Hermione was pacing her bedchamber, her hair in disarray and wild from her tossing and turning throughout the night. She had not slept a wink; in fact, she had written a rather lengthy and carefully curated letter, which she had sent off to Harry with her disgruntled owl. The letter contained mild vulgar language mixed with some proper reasoning and haggling to come to his senses.

She had not received a response and the city outside her window was now cast in an ethereal glow of muted golds of a sun still tucked beneath the horizon. Dawn was creeping closer, each tick of the minute hand sounding like a tolling bell. Raking her fingers through her curls, she shoved them into a pile atop her head and tied a ribbon about them.

“Merde!”

Hermione rifled through her wardrobe, pulling on her riding garb hastily; a comfortable pair of modified men’s trousers she had borrowed from Ron and simple blouse. She shoved her hands into a pair of leather gloves before slipping her wand into the charmed pocket of her trousers.

“Why must I do everything myself?” She was in a huff as she stormed down the stairs.

At this time of day, the townhome was silent and still, her parents fast asleep in their own chambers at the other end of the hall. With no servants to worry about, she met no one who would be questioning her departure.

Slipping out into the gardens behind the townhome, she hurried to the stables. The pair of thestrals tossed their heads in greeting, the skeletal features haunting in the low light of the breaking dawn and darkness of their stalls. She grabbed the halter from the hook, opening the door to one of their stalls. The male thestral tossed his head as she approached it, his leathery wings flexing. He allowed her to slip the halter over his muzzle, fastening the latch beneath his chin and securing it. He let out a hooting nicker, an odd trilling sound that was a mix of a horse and a bird of prey, as his orb-like eyes watched her.

There was only a brief hesitation as she began to tack up the thestral, situating the specially designed saddle against his skeletal withers. Leather straps hooked around its wings before sweeping across its chest and belly.

Leading the male from the stable, Hermione slipped her wand free to cast a disillusionment spell around them before returning it to her pocket.

With a booted foot in the stirrup, Hermione swung her leg up and over the saddle and settled into the seat. She rarely rode, but it was a skill she had deigned to master just as she did everything. Adjusting the toes of her leather boots in the stirrups, she steered the thestral into the alleyway with her knees. He pranced along the cobblestone on cloven hooves, his wings folded tight to his side as they followed the streetlamps.

The town was still quiet, sleepy, most of the residents just beginning to stir. Her magic would obscure them should they run into someone, but just as it was with everything, magic was only a strong illusion and should anyone stare too long they would see her either astride a sinister looking beast or floating through the air. Neither of those would bode well; she tapped her heels into his sides to pick up the pace.

As the alley opened onto a main street, she kicked the thestral into a trot. He tossed his head, his black wispy mane billowing in the wind as they entered a canter. Heading towards Clynwood Park, they passed the sleepy theater and closed shops. A lone leerie could be seen down the way, busy with his routine of extinguishing the flames that flickered within the street lamps.

They cleared the city limits and cantered into the Clynwood Park. A thick fog slithered across the dewy grass as Hermione followed the path, her eyes scanning around them in hopes of finding those idiots.

And there, just in the distance, were a group of shadowy figures and horses. Gripping the reins, Hermione turned the thestral sharply towards them and they raced across the still meadow.

~*~

Draco withdrew his wand from the leather holster within his jacket, his long fingers sliding along the smooth hawthorn wooden shaft. He felt the magic responding eagerly at his touch, beckoning to him.

“Aye, you alright there mate?” Theo asked quietly as he watched him beneath his brows. “You look a bit peaky.”

“Shut it,” Draco scoffed as he turned to look at the Marquis. Harry had cast his jacket aside over a stump, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He was talking to his second; the Baron. The youngest male Weasley looked a touch uneasy, his face a shade of green beneath that bright red hair. Draco could not make out their words, but Harry looked unbothered; but of course, why would he be? His dueling skills were renowned. He was unmatched in skill and accuracy.

“You know, you could have just said that to Potter over there and I could be asleep in my warm bed instead of here, enjoying the sunrise with you.” Theo chimed in unhelpfully.

He had not bothered to wear a jacket this morning, but had at least donned his silver lined waistcoat- the one from the night before. His hair was rumpled and messy.

Giving him a dark look, Draco turned his attention away from his friend to approach the center of their impromptu dueling range. He twirled the wand between his fingers, feeling its weight, the magic coming to life; the way it hummed through him and danced along his veins.

“Potter. Can we get on with this? I have some debts to collect from Zabini and Diggory,” Draco drawled. He flicked his wand experimentally. “Three rounds at ten paces each?”

Both Theo and Ron had moved off to the side to lean against the large oak tree, one of them casting a shield about themselves to protect from any wayward spells. It shimmered and flickered in the early morning light.

Harry had now moved towards Draco, extending his hand for a brief shake. “You do remember what the purpose of this duel is for, do you not?”

Wiping his palm clean on his jacket, as if Harry had somehow sullied his hand, Draco arched a brow with a bored expression. “Something about defending your friend’s honor— it’s as if you forget I am now *engaged* to the Lady Granger? I’ve already saved her honor. This is but a waste of my time.”

“You’re the reason she is in this mess, tempting her to besmirch her name—“ Harry snapped.

Draco let out a low laugh, “*I tempted her?* Oh, you dumb fool... I did no such thing. The girl is of sound mind and made the decision to pursue me all on her own. I merely acquiesced to her wishes.”

Harry had already retreated and Draco followed suit ten paces.

“You talk a lot for a Duke that claims to never want a bride, yet here you are. Engaged to someone you likely deem below you,” Harry spat as he lifted his wand. “You had no intention to wed her, just use her for your own amusement and then discard her when you grew bored, just as you had with every mistress prior.”

He tried to ignore the flare of annoyance at the Marquis words; the sharp sting due to the fact he was right. Or rather, that he would have been right had he accused Draco of this weeks ago. “And you talk a lot for a wizard who is hardly as pious as he leads everyone to believe — did you not engage in a scandal similar to my own with *my* friend, Pansy? Funny how the shoe is now on the other foot. Or rather... not so funny. You did not care this much for *her* reputation.”

“Enough,” Harry snapped, pushing his raven hair from his face. “Let’s get on with it.”

“Very well,” Draco’s wand danced through the air as he sketched a bow. “Ladies first.”

The first crack of magic tore through the air, Draco deflecting the spell easily. It slammed into the dirt near his feet, the grass smoldering. The second sent back to Harry, who barely dodged the disarming spell.

“Child’s play,” Draco called as he flicked his wand, sending a spiraling hex towards the other wizard. It was blocked, ricocheting off their second’s shield near the tree. “You’re going to use *Expelliarmus*? What is this, first year?”

He could feel his magic coiling through him, begging to be used. It snaked its way down his arm to his wand. The wood resonated between his fingertips, echoing the faint excitement inside him at the familiar sensation. Draco side stepped and dodge another disarming spell, scoffing loudly at the attempt. He flicked another hex at Harry.

“Stop deflecting, Malfoy,” Harry hissed. “Bloody fight me like a wizard of your caliber is supposed to.”

Draco felt a pang of annoyance, shielding himself as he stumbled back from a particularly strong spell. He twirled his wand as he pushed his hair from his face, and then he focused that magic to the top of his wand.

“*Sectumsempra!*”

The spell leapt from his wand eagerly, flying across the gap between them. A shadow shifted into his peripherals and time slowed as a massive thestral galloped between them. There was no way to stop his spell as it careened violently through the air and slammed into the thestral and rider. The beast let out wail as the magic cut deep wounds into its body and wings, blood spraying as it reared back. Its rider was thrown onto the ground with a resounding thump.

The thestral peeled off in a panic, taking off into the air and leaving Draco and Harry staring at where it once stood. For a brief moment, time stood still, both completely stunned. And then the realization of who it was slammed into Draco and his legs were carrying him at a sprint towards the fallen figure.

“Bloody hell— Granger, *Granger!*” Draco skidded to her side, dropping to his knees just as Harry reached them.

“Shit, no... Ron!” Harry was calling over his shoulder.

Draco didn’t hear them, didn’t pay attention to them. *Couldn’t*. Not when his future wife had been thrown from her mount from a curse, which *he* had cast. His hands were wet with blood as he reached for her, her blouse stained with growing blossoms of red. Draco felt his hands shake as they found her face, cupping her cheeks as he turned her face to his.

“Hermione?” Draco whispered frantically. Her lashes fluttered, as if battling against the pain and consciousness. A slice cut across her cheek and into her hairline.

He heard footsteps behind him as Theo ran up, his wand out and ready. He shoved Draco aside, “I got this. You’re bloody terrible at healing— Harry, don’t even think about it. You’ll end up doing more harm than good. Ronald, go fetch her Thestral before a Muggle sees it.

Bloody hell, why does the witch have one of those? They're terrifying. Buy her a pretty pony for a wedding gift."

None of the words his friend spewed meant anything to him. Draco had shifted aside to let his friend in, cradling Hermione's head carefully in the palm of his hands. She looked half unconscious, her lips pale and parted.

"Stupid, stupid witch. What on earth were you thinking?" He scolded her half heartedly.

She lifted a hand as if to reach up to him, but her fist clenched as a spasm of pain hit her. "Draco?"

"Yes, I'm here. It's me. Harry lost the duel—"

Harry coughed loudly.

The ground beneath his knees felt wet and he knew she was losing blood faster than Theo was healing. Panic fluttered, growing like a wild beast within him. He had caused this. He had given in again to the dark temptation of forbidden magic. And he had harmed someone he cared about.

"*Theo,*" Draco tore his eyes away from Hermione to look at the wizard, who was chanting '*Vulnera Sanentur*' with sweeping gestures of his wand over her prone body.

"You two are bloody idiots," Hermione whispered as her lashes fluttered shut and her breathing grew more shallow.

A Mother's Ire

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on posting, I was a bit "off" last week.

Curious Readers of London;

Do you see what I see?

The late Duchess Malfoy and Lady Granger have been spending a bit of time together as of late, have they not?

With the upcoming nuptials of their children, it seems these two have taken a sudden shine to one another... Or is there more than meets the eye? I am not one to gossip, but the engagement of the Wallflower and the Duke seems rather hasty, does it not?

I'll let you be the decider of that.

However, it does seem their lovely mama's have been busy with the wedding plans.

Also, did anyone else spy the thestral in the park?

The Lady Quibbler

~*~

Draco apparated directly into his London estate with Hermione, unsure if there would be wards on her family's comfortable townhome or not that would prevent him from accessing the property. Seconds later, Theo appeared at his elbow. He didn't know where her friends were and he didn't care as he barked an order to the footman who had hastily appeared before him. A house elf was sent to notify the Grangers while Draco carried Hermione to one of the rooms. He was only dimly aware it was his own bedroom as he laid her on the top of the mattress. Not long after, Theo and another servant had appeared with bandages and salves.

The drapes were thrown open to let the room fill with sunlight, revealing the extent of Hermione's wounds.

“Get my mother,” Draco demanded to no one in particular while he stripped off his cloak, casting it aside as he returned to the bed. His fingers shook slightly as he brushed them across her pale temples. She barely stirred at the touch, her body limp. “I’m sorry, Granger,” he whispered when Theo began arranging everything on the bedside table.

Narcissa joined them in a matter of moments, her evening gown wrapped around her and her hair unkempt from being awoken from her sleep. Her sharp eyes made quick work of the room as she joined them.

“Why is Miss Granger—“ she stopped mid sentence when she noticed the wounds and stains of blood on Hermione’s gown. “How did this happen? When? I’ll need to know the spell used..” she snatched Draco’s forgotten wand from his hand. “Did you send for her parents?”

“Yes, it was one of the first things I did,” Draco said as she bodily pushed him aside to examine Hermione herself. “I met with Potter for a duel...”

Blue eyes snapped to his face briefly and he knew she would have scolded him had the situation not been dire. “Spell?”

“*Sectumsempra.*” Guilt settled like a stone in the pit of his stomach after admitting what he had done.

“I *told* your Uncle Snape that a boy should not learn such spells. The lot of them were terrible influence on you... Dark Magic and hexes...” Narcissa hissed angrily. She only briefly looked away from her wounded charge. “You and Theodore will wait outside this room for her parents. The situation is bad enough without risking further questions of her reputation.”

Draco wanted to argue but the stern look from his mother was enough to send him shuffling off to the hall behind his friend like a scolded child. Except this was not some simple game or trick he had played that warranted being told off, this was someone’s life on the line— and an innocent one, no less. He had done this. He should have told Harry to piss off, that he had no reason to prove anything or duel him.

To keep himself occupied, he made his way downstairs to pace the foyer while he waited for Hermione’s parents to arrive, and rehearsed the reason she was injured and in his home.

~*~

It was late afternoon when Narcissa finally emerged from the room with Lady Granger, their faces drawn and pale as they joined Draco, Harry, Ron, Lord Granger and Ginny in the drawing room. The young redheaded witch had been summoned by her brother, and was standing quite a distance away from Theo while avoiding eye contact with him studiously. Wiping her hands on a towel, it was Narcissa who spoke.

“I’ve managed to close the wounds and reverse the damage. Miss Granger will be fine and make a full recovery, although she is resting after the blood loss.” A sigh of relief filled the room. Ginny verbally expressed her relief in an explicit swear that caused her brother to shush her. “We gave her some blood replenishing potions and pain relief but... She is still unconscious, drifting in and out of it. I would advise against moving her back home just yet... In the meantime, I’ll do what I can to quiet any gossip. I’m thinking of taking the Lady Granger for a stroll to make it appear everyone was invited for a meal.”

Narcissa looked reserved as she turned toward her son with an expression somewhere between disappointment and frustration.

She then looked toward Lord Granger, “Once again, I cannot apologize or express my sympathies enough over this incident, My Lord. I can only hope a lesson was learned by my son and his companions of pursuing and engaging in such folly.”

“I’ll go up to see my daughter now,” came the man’s response as he rose from the chair he had been seated in. His face was still drawn and wary, speckled with concern. He looked at his wife expectantly. She motioned for him to follow her and the senior Grangers left the room.

Which left Narcissa alone with the remaining adolescents. Her head was tipped, as if listening to the retreating footsteps. A flick of her wand and the door of the study shut. Gently. Quietly. Unlike the hard sharp ice of her eyes as she looked at each of them in turn, save for Ginny.

“How *dare* you participate in a duel?” She hissed. Harry cleared his throat, stepping toward the door as if he meant to escape the scolding and she snapped those blue eyes on him. “Sit. *Down*. I’m not done yet.”

“But I’m—“

“Not my son? I don’t care, young man. You participated in this folly just as much as my son and you will receive the blunt end of the punishment, just as he will.” She had already pointed her finger at Theo and Ron, who were both actively trying to shrink into the shadows. “And you two. *How* could you let these *idiots* duel? Where were your heads, besides up your own asses? Utterly ridiculous and shameful behavior, from the lot of you.” She looked at Ginny, who was shifting awkwardly. Narcissa softened, “Except you, my dear. You might be the only sensible one in this lot.”

Ginny flushed slightly beneath the minimal praise, dipping her head in acknowledgement.

“Now, Theodore had told me there was a thestral involved? Was it captured? Is it injured? What is the status of it?” Narcissa folded her hands in front of her.

Ron rubbed the back of his flushed neck as he looked down at the ground, “Yes, Ma’am, but I was unable to capture it. It flew off and kept bolting whenever I drew near—“

Narcissa let out a long suffering sigh. “You mean to say you left an injured magical beast in a park that is likely crawling with Muggles? For Merlin’s sake...” she pinched the bridge of

her nose. “Very well. Ronald, Theodore. Your task is to get back to the park, track down the beast, and bring it here. I’ll call a creature healer. Hopefully it’s done what thestrals do best and it’s been hidden and unseen.”

She then dismissed the two young lords with a wave of her hand towards the door; both only briefly bowed on their way out, leaving Draco alone with Ginny and Harry. They spared a glance at one another.

“You, my dear girl,” Narcissa had turned to Ginny now, who visibly straightened and fussed with her skirts. “Will head on upstairs if you wish to keep your friend company while she recovers. It would be best if she is not alone when and if her parents should leave. I will also have a house elf in the room with you two at all times.”

Ginny gave an awkward, bumbling curtsy, her red curls falling over shoulder. “Yes, Ma’am. I’ll just... head on up and see if the Grangers need anything in the meantime, shan’t I?”

She scurried past Draco without even a sympathetic glance, leaving him to his fate with his very irate and concerned mother. Draco swore she even threw him a lewd gesture just before she left the room. He had no doubt Ginny was just as pissed at him as his mother.

Those startling blue eyes now locked on him and he felt like a small boy. Draco slowly sank down onto a chair beneath that look, folding his hands in his lap as any vanity of pride vanished. Guilt gnawed at him. Harry held his ground, but just barely. His back was ramrod straight and hands folded at his lower back.

“I do not even know where to begin with this but you look as if you are remorseful and regretting your actions without my disappointment laid on top of it,” Narcissa scolded softly as she looked between the pair of them. “I do not know what possessed you to even consider such extreme actions.”

“I was defending—“ Harry started, but Narcissa held up a hand to silence him.

“Do *not* even patronize me, Mister Potter. I am well aware of what you *think* you were doing, but it seems the two of you share a single brain cell and cannot understand the stupidity behind such actions. Defending a witch's honor is... not as flattering as you think it is, and will cause more harm than good. Unfortunately, literally this time. Miss Hermione Granger does not *need* either of you to defend her. Had she not been injured, I’m sure you two would be tied up in pretty bows from her hexes.” Narcissa scoffed loudly, “*Defending*. She is already engaged to my son. Her reputation does not need anyone defending it! It is fine. , you two imbeciles risked making it worse. Now, I expect you two to put aside your differences for that injured young lady upstairs and find a way to fix this.”

Without further ado, the witch turned sharply on her heel and left the room, the door shutting quietly behind her. The silence that followed Narcissa’s departure was heavy and awkward. Neither of the young lords looked at the other, both staring off into the space directly before them. The only sound to be heard was the slow *tick tick tick* of the clock on the mantle. Draco lost track of how long the minutes stretched on before he finally cleared his throat, rising from his chair. Straightening the arms of his coat, he paused at the lingering stains of blood on them. His throat constricted slightly at the sight of it.

“So, what now?” Draco asked quietly. “I obviously would have won the duel...”

“Oh, piss off, Malfoy,” Harry snapped as he strode forward. “Your mother is right.”

“Of course she is. Mother is always right,” Draco replied tightly. He gave Harry an annoyed look. “I should have refused your ridiculous challenge. I’ve already asked for her hand in marriage, and had no reason to indulge you in your *chivalrous* attempt. A bit too late, wasn’t it?”

Harry folded his arms. “Late? How was it—“

“Because you never dueled for Pansy when you two were caught.” He looked at the other wizard steadily. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? Because you refused to defend her honor when I challenged you, you still feel some sort of grief or pity and thought you would find your balls by defending your friend?”

“You have no bloody idea what you’re going on about,” Harry retorted sharply. He strode toward the door. “Bloody mental, you are.”

“Then why did you challenge me? Now, of all times? You could have before when you first found out about us, yet you did not.”

“Enough.” Harry waved Draco away like a pest as he reached the door. Draco strode to the side table, picking up the decanter and filling his glass with a shot of fire-whiskey. He lifted it, taking a small whiff of the potent mix as he thought for a moment.

“It’s because she said something to you, didn’t she? Hermione, that is. She said or did something that reminded you of your failure to do anything for Pansy and you decided to act now,” he took a slow sip of the drink. “As if her honor needed your defending...”

“You’re a real prick, you know that? Maybe she’ll realize it too,” Harry snapped before he stalked from the room.

~*~

The silence in his room was pressing in from all sides. The house elf that sat watch was busy knitting beside him, humming a tune to herself as her feet jiggled in time to the notes, and a footman stood outside the open door. Draco had brought a book in some attempt to read it while he waited for Hermione to awaken, but had alternated between staring blankly at the pages before him and looking at her prone form.

It had been a day since the incident and she remained asleep.

His mother had assured him, again, that she might take a while to wake up as the healing process, magical or not, was taxing on the body, and the process varied wildly between each person.

So, as soon as her parents left, Draco had taken their vigil at her bedside. They had come back shortly after breakfast and again for lunch- timed thusly so as not to raise suspicion but would be considered normal for the parents of two betrothed people preparing for a wedding. Her thestral had been recaptured, its injuries substantial but not life threatening. It had been healed and returned to its mate in the Granger's stables.

Taking a look at the house elf, Draco slowly set aside his book and rose to his feet. He crossed the room to where she lay, still and quiet. Hermione had been changed from her riding gown and into a more comfortable, appropriate one. Looking down at her, Draco took in *her*; Her skin had regained its healthy glow, her curls spread out prettily around her face against the silk pillow. She looked small and slight in the center of his large bed frame. The windows were open, allowing sunlight and a breeze to drift into the room and kiss her face.

Draco warily cast a glance at the house elf once more before he lowered himself to sit on the edge of the bed, reaching a hand out. His finger lightly brushed her cheek, just once. Guilt still gnawed at him hungrily. While her skin bore no obvious scars that he could see and the wounds had healed, he knew that she would likely bear the emotional scar of the curse.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper.

He was not sure if she could even hear him, or if he wanted her to. He rarely apologized and yet... Draco did not think mere words were enough to even begin to show how much he regretted his actions and that *she* had been the one to take the fall— literally, in this case.

His throat constricted as his words failed him. Instead, he left the bed for a moment to gather his thoughts. He plucked the book up he had been reading, turning it over in his hands as he strode back to the bed.

Finding the page he left off, he settled back down beside Hermione. For a few moments, Draco read silently to himself, his eyes slipping along the page and devouring each word. But soon, the words fell from his lips, soft and rolling from his tongue. Each sentence brought perhaps a slight sense of relief. He wondered if she found any comfort in the passages as he did.

Draco read to her as the shadows grew long, losing track of time as he lost himself between the pages of the book and in the story it offered. He read until his lids grew heavy and his body slumped onto the mattress.

~*~

"Dinner time is—" Narcissa paused just in the doorway of her son's room, her words falling silent just as her eyes fell onto the bed.

There, in the center of the mattress lay her son and beside him, Hermione, fast asleep, his nearly silent snore filling the room. The book he had been apparently reading, forgotten

beside him on the bed. And although he lay on the sheets, fully clothed with boots and all, his hand had found Hermione's between them. Their fingers interlocked, it almost appeared as if they had both merely fallen asleep. And while Narcissa loathed the reason behind this sudden soft intimacy between them, she was rather pleased to see it at all. So rarely did her son show any warmth to another. So rarely did he care.

And while Narcissa had not ever dreamed her son would end up engaged to such a curious witch, she had come to realize she herself did not loathe the idea of it.

Hermione reminded Narcissa much of her younger self; of who she had been, before she had been manipulated and controlled by her status. A headstrong, willful, intelligent young woman who could and would make others bow to her. Her son included.

The faint smile grew at the thought of her idiotic, stubborn son finally bending to the will of another. She was no fool to think it would be an easy marriage but... Narcissa felt something real had grown between the pair of them. Something beyond their silly games and pride.

Narcissa crept into the room and glanced at the house elf, whom had also fallen asleep. Not that the sweet little creature would have said anything. She, too, had been eagerly waiting for Draco to finally meet his match, just as everyone had been.

First setting aside the knitting needles and covering the little elf with a throw blanket, Narcissa then moved to her son and his betrothed. She knew this would be a rare moment for her to witness. A tender one that neither would ever admit had happened. Narcissa put the forgotten book aside before covering her son with a blanket of his own. She just barely resisted the urge to brush aside a lock of blond hair from his brow before she left the room.

The Wedding of the Season

Chapter Notes

I apologize for any delay in updates, RL has been kicking my ass.

Also, I do want to thank everyone for the comments they leave. I read every single one, I am just absolutely terrible at responding. But 1000% they make my day.

Hermione stood on the balcony that overlooked the sprawling gardens that encircled Malfoy Manor. The air was filled with the chatter of guests, and the flowering scent of plants in full bloom. From somewhere in the distance, she could just make out the hint of fresh baked bread. Music lilted lazily, and rose petals danced on the gentle breeze. Her stomach turned in anxious knots as she looked towards the center of the gardens where the top of an grandeur stone belvedere could be seen towering above the hedges.

There her future awaited. The wedding of the Season; the Duke marrying her, the lowly and undeserving wallflower.

It was still early morning, and only a few guests had arrived so far. The ceremony was due to start a short bit before lunch, so everyone could go eat and be merry for the remainder of the evening, enjoying the festivities that Narcissa had so meticulously planned. Her stomach fluttered at the thought that she would somehow be at the center of this. That all eyes would not only be on the Duke, but on *her* as well.

“Are you growing nervous yet?” A voice drawled from the shadows of the room behind her.

Hermione whirled about to face the Duke as he sauntered into her temporary room, the door shutting quietly behind him.

“As if I would *ever* admit that to you,” she scoffed playfully. Hermione clasped her hands behind her back as she left the balcony to join him in the room; it would not be due for anyone to spy them from the gardens below. “‘Tis it not bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, Your Grace?”

Draco waved a careless hand, his silver signet ring flashing with the gesture, “A silly Muggle superstition, that. Bad luck does not truly exist and I would not allow it to ruin the day.”

She scowled at him a little, “Funny that you say that. I clearly remember a rash bit of bad luck.” She tugged at the high lace collar of her gown, revealing a pale, silvery scar that dashed just across her collarbone.

Again, he waved her words aside, refusing to look at her or the scar that he had caused.

What an arse. If her wand was not on the vanity, she would have hexed him.

“That’s *hardly* bad luck. Perhaps a touch *unlucky*, but not bad. More... Wrong place, wrong time,” he reasoned. She released her collar with a roll of her eyes, the lace bouncing back into place.

“Wrong place, right time,” Hermione repeated sharply as she came to stop in front of him. She rocked on her heels a bit while she studied him from beneath her lashes. Freshly shaved and washed, his white blond hair was still damp and swept back from his face. He wore simple attire, as if he had stolen away to visit her before changing into whatever pompous robes a Duke was expected to don for a wedding. Much as she was wearing a comfortable day gown with none of the unnecessary frills and undergarments that her new position would demand.

A final nod to the freedom she once had, before she turned to the future before her.

Hermione could not tell if that terrified her or not. She had come to terms with it over the incident in the park, as she would call it. Neither had addressed it since. But it was a thorn in her side. But Hermione was uncertain how to brooch the subject; not the use of such a spell, but the aftermath. The fact that she had awoken to find herself in his bed, their fingers laced together. A gesture so simple in its intimacy. The way Draco had looked that night was burned into her memory. The way, even in his sleep, his brows had been furrowed. As if he had been concerned, nay, upset at her condition.

It had been... surprising, to say the least, to find the Duke in bed with her. Not unsettling but almost comforting.

But neither had mentioned it. Perhaps he did not know he had fallen asleep next to her like that. He had been gone the next morning and the subject never broached. Nor did they discuss the incident that had occurred at all, and the fact that she had woken in his bed.

“I had it handled, Granger,” Draco replied as he looked down at her. “You needn’t have worried that pretty little head of yours that I was going to harm Potter.”

Hermione folded her arms. “Your Grace, you quite literally had used a *curse* on him that would have met its mark had I not intervened.”

“Hmm, I mean, you took the hit quite well. I would have just marked up his pretty face.”

“Had my thestral’s wing not taken the brunt of the curse, I very well could have died. I almost *did* die.” She reminded him coolly. Hermione could see the way the light faded from his eyes as he spoke, shutting her out. His jaw tightened.

“But did you? *Did* you die? You might be exaggerating a little,” he replied tightly, his tone jesting but his expression closed off.

Hermione softened slightly, “I’m fine, Your Grace. Perhaps a touch irate still, but otherwise fine. Nothing a little bedrest and...” she hesitated. This was it. She could drop the question to

him, call him out for holding her hand and— what? What did she hope to gain? “And some bonding time with your mother couldn’t fix.”

He made a noncommittal sound.

She continued; “I just hope, for my sake, you won’t be so quick to draw again and perhaps keep the duels to a more friendly territory. Honestly, there was no reason for it to begin with.”

Draco sighed. “You’re right—“

“I always am.”

He pointed a finger at her as he *tskd*. “Don’t get cocky, Granger. You’re right *on this*. I should have refused the duel from your nimwit of a friend. He had no claim to you or your honor, and it was foolish of me to think I needed to protect it.”

“You’re right on that. I don’t need you or anyone protecting my reputation.”

“Careful, I almost feel as if I am speaking to a feisty Duchess who knows her place and takes shit from no one,” Draco replied, his lips twisting into a cocky smirk. Before she could gather a response, he retreated a step and bent into a perfect bow at the waist. “The hour grows nearer to when I become shackled to you. I must be off. The next time we meet will be for our vows.”

And then he was gone.

~*~

The courtyard around the pavilion where Draco waited was packed with chairs of eager guests, all vying to spy the witch that had captured him into wedlock. It was apparent that most, if not nearly all, in attendance had no real idea of who Hermione was. Because that is how she had intentionally kept it. A quiet, reserved, fiery wallflower.

The gathering crowd was abuzz with conversation, eagerly waiting to catch a glimpse of his bride. His stomach tightened, fluttered even, at the thought. Truly, marriage had always been expected of him. A duty. An obligation thrust upon him due to his title alone— and yet... in this moment, from where he stood waiting for Hermione, it did not *feel* that way.

True, their hands had been tied and they were being forced to wed, but somehow he did not feel as if that were the case. Somehow, marrying her almost felt like a relief of that burden.

The wind dances gently around him, carrying white rose petals about in a magical way— he wondered if his mother had charmed them to do these whimsical dances and swirls overhead.

The music changed tempo, from the slow melodious tune to keep the guests happy to one that everyone immediately recognized. A hush fell over the crowd.

Two women walked down the carpeted aisle first in a row. Ginny and Luna, both elegantly dressed, intentionally done so as to attract the attention of bachelors, Draco knew. Theo, who stood to his left, straightened slightly at the sight of them. Draco dare not look at his friend, afraid to miss the moment Hermione would walk down the aisle. His mind jolted sharply at the idea. Why was he worried about that? To witness her expression of utter defeat? To see how disappointed she was that she was being forced to wed at all? Draco could not imagine how she must feel in all this. Perhaps he was a fool for not asking her. He felt anxious, himself. Was *her* stomach dancing like the rose petals above? Swirling and fluttering about, as if it had a mind of its own?

Draco's suit felt tight, the silken cravat at his throat itchy. He felt hot standing beneath the rising sun.

No one was looking at *him*, though.

All eyes were focused at the end of the aisle, where it disappeared between the hedges.

Seconds passed and it felt like an eternity.

Would she skip the alter? Leave him here as a way to embarrass him in the most brutal way possible for a Duke? It was utterly scandalous, and would tarnish the Malfoy family name.

She's not coming, the voice in his head sniggered. *She's gone and left you. Cold feet? No, the witch does not get those. She's left you here—*

And there she was.

The voice of doubt faded from his mind in an instant.

Hermione, on the arm of her father and mother, stood at the end of the aisle. Framed by the hedges, it was a picturesque moment, painted in his mind. The gown she wore bespoke of her upcoming position as his Duchess, but softened by who she was. Draco knew she had had a heavy hand in the design and cut of the wedding dress itself. Simplistic, elegant, yet beautifully crafted. A layering of hand woven lacework and silks. He released her gown was not of pure white but a soft almond, complimenting the tones of her skin.

A diamond, truly.

The veil obscured her face as they walked down the aisle, each step bringing her closer to him and simultaneously increasing and lessening those obnoxious butterflies within his stomach.

"Breathe," Theo whispered beside him.

Draco hastily drew in a breath, having not realized he had been holding it. He felt lightheaded and almost... *Giddy* that she was real, that she was here. That she had deemed him worthy to wed.

Not that she had much choice and yes, he was a Duke and anyone would die to be in her dainty slippers.

But he was aware of *who* she was. And Hermione Granger, soon to be Malfoy, was a force to be reckoned with. One that would have no qualms about leaving him high and dry just to prove her point.

Upon reaching the alter where he stood, he took her hand that was offered by her father. Gloved fingers gripped his as she looked up at him, and even through the veil that obscured her face he could sense the slight smirk there. A lifting of her lips, the confident little pixie.

“You’re a bit pale, Your Grace,” she whispered as soon as her parents stepped away and she joined him at his side. “Don’t tell me you are feeling anxious?”

“I do believe it’s the heat that is making me peaky,” Draco whispered from the corner of his mouth. “You seem a bit flushed.”

“This corset is smothering me,” came her retort. He could have laughed. The officiant began droning the words of the service. “Surprised to see me?”

He tipped his head slightly to look at her out of the corner of her eye. “Should I be?”

“I spent some time deliberating, My Lord,” Hermione was staring straight ahead, past the officiant. “But I fear I could not bear to part with my library.”

“Your— *what?*”

“The library at the Manor when we wed. You’re just a pretty bauble accessory for me when I must go out in public. My Duke, the emerald of the Season.” Her tone was light, jesting, while her fingers had briefly gripped his in a moment of reassurance.

The officiant continued to speak, but Draco did not hear a word that was said. He could only hear her. Feel her, beside him. His entire being was hyper focused on only Hermione, and it caught him off guard. The nearness of her and he suddenly craved her. How he needed to kiss her. Seeing her just before the ceremony had been the first time since the incident. She had awoken and left. Perhaps mad at him, which she had every right to be, and a part of Draco had thought she would have called it off.

And a proper gentleman would have called on her, checked up on her and yet... he had not. He had let his mother do it. Perhaps he had been cowardly, or even ashamed.

And then he had been unable to stop himself from finding his way to her that morning. To track her down in her room and *see* her, to maybe assure himself that she was real and *here*.

Before Draco could even finish his thoughts or rationalize the emotions that dashed through him, he was turning to face her. He found, as if by magic, the ring in his hand. The emerald embedded in silver glittered in the sunlight of the garden, a family heirloom altered for her. The ring slipped onto her finger and past her knuckle. The officiant held his wand tip over their joined hands, silvery strands of magic winding around their fingers and wrists, joining

them intimately as they were bound together, by vows and magic. The strands whirled and twisted like delicate vines, pulsing gently as if waiting.

A single kiss and the vow would be sealed.

Whiskey brown eyes found his, her plush pink lips parting slightly as if to ask if he was sure. He had never wanted to marry. Neither had she. They had wanted their freedom and yet, here they were.

His eyes searched hers, begging her to stay and giving her permission to leave.

“Kiss me,” Hermione whispered as she rose up onto her toes.

Their lips met and the entire courtyard disappeared around them.

~*~

“They look rather pleased with themselves, don’t they?” Theo asked the redheaded witch at his side as they stood in silence, watching the ballroom floor become awash with colors of swirling silks and patterns. She was alone, surprisingly. He rather thought she was fetching in her bridesmaid gown.

Ginny did not even look away from her friend, who looked resplendent in her wedding gown as she swept past in the arms of the Duke. She instead lifted the champagne flute to her painted lips, taking a slow sip. “I would hope so, My Lord. It is their wedding day, afterall.”

“You know as well as I do that neither of them ever wished to get married,” he whispered into her ear, leaning a touch too close, his elbow brushing hers.

She lifted a brow. “And yet here we are. Joyous.”

“Indeed, here we are.”

They fell silent for a moment, merely observers of the festivities. Theo was pleased to see Draco wed, especially to Hermione. He had been angling for the two of them from the first moment they met. The sparks had been obvious to everyone, but them. Thick headed fools, they were. One of the reasons he had tried to make a bet with Draco; nothing quite like a dash of competitiveness to help override lingering stubbornness. While Draco had claimed that he wanted no one, Theo had opened a window. To give him a glimpse at what he truly wanted. A tantalizing glimpse of what he could have.

All it took was a slight nudge from Theo.

“What was your hand in all this?” He asked, a touch suspicious. From what he knew of the witch, she was as stubborn, if not more so, than Draco.

“I’ve no idea what you mean,” Ginny replied sweetly. She finished her champagne off and pressed the empty glass into his hands. “I had no hand in what these two have done to reach this point.”

Theo held back his disbelieving scoff. “I don’t believe that for a moment.”

“You don’t have to,” Ginny shrugged her shoulders a little, her fiery red curls shimmering in the candlelight of the ballroom as she turned to look up at him. “Now can you either bring me a new glass if you wish to converse, or you can ditch it and we can take a spin about the floor together.”

“I’m not sure on either of those as being a good decision with your Potter watching over you like a hawk. I fear he might challenge me to a duel next.” Theo was only half jesting. He was keenly aware of the Marquis off to the other side of the ballroom, who had glanced their way while conversing with the Patil twins and Lovegood. “Although the odds may be in my favor. He’s a terrible aim.”

She let out a small laugh at the sake of her friend and linked her arm through his. “A dance it is.”

~*~

The edge of the shelf dug into her shoulders as Draco’s lips found hers, the kiss searing and possessive as he breathed for her. They had stolen away after their first dance to the library; the very one she so boldly claimed to be hers.

Hermione gripped his shoulders as his hands raked down along her body, fingers hastily pulling up the layers of her wedding dress. The silk would become wrinkled, and she did not care. She was bare underneath the gown, the cool air of the library kissing her heated skin. Desire curled through her like a growing flame, fanned by the graze of his fingers along the back of her thighs as one hand freed his hard length from his trousers and the other lifted her. They fit together as if made for one another, his cock slipping along the dampness growing between the vee of her legs.

Like a man possessed, his hands gripped her. His lips burned hers. They melted together as one as he pressed into her, the pressure building and the fire spreading as he claimed her, right then and there. Hermione’s moans were captured in his mouth as Draco filled her, pinned between his body and the shelf.

She felt like a wanton, vulnerable, yet lost entirely with him.

She had not wanted to wait until that night. They already had their first night together. Now she just needed *him*. Hermione had not realized how badly she did until he had come to her that morning. Had not realized she had forgiven him because she was so used to holding onto grudges. She *should* stay mad at Draco. He deserved her ire.

But Hermione had wanted to tear off his ridiculously pompous cravat at the altar. To vanish his tailored robes out of existence. Waiting until that night was not an option.

The sound of him, the feel of him, was what she craved. Forgiveness could be gained later.

His grip on her rear tightened as he lifted her to take him deeper, to press harder and faster into her. Stolen moments, forbidden in nature but forgiven because Draco was now *hers*. Her entire being was wound tight with each thrust, pushing her closer to that edge. Hermione felt herself shattering, splintering with her climax. Her cries of pleasure were silenced as his lips claimed hers, muffling their sounds of mutual pleasure. She gripped him, her fingers tightening on his shoulders as she came on him. He pumped his length into her, helping her ride out her waves.

Draco held her tight to him, secure, warm, easing her down from that high. Her skin felt flush and damp with heat. He settled her down to her feet, fixing her skirts carefully before he readjusted himself. His hands caught her face, drawing her in for another kiss.

“We need to get back before we are missed,” he whispered against her lips. “I suggest we stroll along the patio to cool off that blush from your cheeks, fetching as it is.”

Settling In

The first week at the Wiltshire Estate was much of a blur for Hermione. There was this grand sense of excitement and thrill of the move to the beautiful and imposing mansion. In touring her new home. Losing herself amongst the hundreds of books in *her* library. Finding herself swept into Draco's arms repeatedly and ushered into empty rooms for a quick bout of hasty lovemaking.

But by the second week, that excitement started diminishing as she felt the first pangs of being home sick.

The estate, which was grand and impressive, quickly became overwhelming. Hermione found herself taking wrong turns several times a day and becoming almost lost and disorientated in the numerous halls and rooms.

The gardens were no easier to navigate, finding that even with the manicured hedges she could not simply read and meander as she so loved to do in the parks in London. No, Hermione was forced to pay attention to her surroundings, unless she wanted to return home after dusk from becoming turned around. She began to miss the simplicity of her old life, as well. The comfortable draping dresses she had once worn were now swapped in favor of more expensive and fashionable gowns, fitted with confining contraptions to press her breasts obscenely high and tuck in her stomach to give her a narrow waist.

'Twas the height of French fashion, the modiste and stated as she tugged harder at the strings of Hermione's corset, *'a duchess must always be a model in society.'*

While they were technically away on their honeymoon and guests did not appear on the threshold, it did not abate the owls from arriving daily. Letters of congratulations and gifts were presented to the new couple, all of which Hermione was expected and tasked to respond to. Unlike before when she could simply decide to ignore correspondence, a Duchess could not.

Draco was soon pulled away by matters of the estate, which kept him away until the late hours of the night. Many times she found herself falling asleep alone in the bed before he would finally join her, exhausted and too tired to take care of her needs. Most nights he apologized for disturbing her and would simply pull her close to him.

Days came and went. Hermione had managed to evade most formal events she was invited to. She was not expected to attend, Narcissa had stated, because she was now a Duchess and no one would dare demand her attendance. If she chose to go, it would be deemed a favorable thing to the host and Hermione must choose wisely. Which meant that Hermione was now expected to memorize and learn everyone in their society; whom to socialize with or be seen conversing with, which soirées to attend, if she should make an appearance at the races and which weddings she had to sit in.

With the honeymoon period drawing to a close, Narcissa also insisted that they open their home to visitors- whether this be a luncheon, soirée, ball, or something more intimate such as

tea- was up to Hermione.

Unwilling to give in to hosting full parties, the new Duchess settled on a simple tea and brunch.

Which soon grew into a small garden tea party.

And went from her closest friends to well over fifteen witches.

Hermione perched on her chair, her cup of tea untouched before her on the table. The air was filled with the sounds of light chatter and giggling. It was not until Ginny kicked her shin beneath the cover of the table that Hermione snapped out of her daze.

"Your Grace," Ginny tightly whispered over the rim of her cup, "I do believe Luna was talking to you."

She turned her attention hastily to the blonde witch, who was smiling at her mildly from across the table. Her voice was kind and soft, "Oh, that is quite alright, Ginevra. I do believe the Duchess has a lot on her mind."

The subtle use of her new titles reminded her of who she was, of who she was supposed to be. Hermione sat straighter. "I'm sorry, Luna. I did not mean to ignore you, I was just—"

Luna reached a hand over and covered hers, patting it gently. "Worry not, my dear. I understand. I know this is a lot for you and that this silly tea party was most likely not your idea." The witch leaned closer to her, her voice a soft whisper, "Would you like to slip away? I can make an excuse for you."

"She's a Duchess, Luna. She does not need to make an excuse. She can just leave any time she wishes now," Ginny chimed in with a smirk.

"I'm alright," Hermione replied, "Truly, I am. There is just a lot on my mind."

"Understandable," Luna said as she withdrew her hand. She remained cheery and bright. "Your home is so lovely. How are you enjoying it?"

"Yes, do tell us how you are enjoying your lovely new mansion and the title that goes with it," Pansy spoke up from the bench she sat upon, Millicent smirking beside her.

Hermione straightened, bristling at the tone. The sudden snark and biting comment irked and confused her, especially since the witch had held her silence over the engagement and had not uttered a word about what she undoubtedly suspected occurred between her and Draco. It was jarring. Almost as if she had returned to the old petty lady she always was towards Hermione. And then she realized... that was exactly what Pansy was doing. She could, even now, tarnish Hermione's reputation. The marriage lowered the risk but did not eliminate it. Pansy resuming her old antics was almost an olive branch, of sorts.

"I must say I find both to be very comfortable and accommodating," Hermione replied lightly. For the first time that afternoon she reached for her tea, her fingers trembling slightly which caused her to steel her nerves. She had sparred words many times before with the

witch, the only difference now was that Hermione held the upper hand with her title and was unsure of the steps of this delicate dance. “The Duke has been quite pleasant.”

Pansy lifted her dark brows as she sipped from her teacup. “I heard he is quite broody. Has your... *sunny* disposition remedied that? Or perhaps the promise of an heir?”

The tea was cold against her lips and she bit back her cough as she choked on it.

An heir?

Hermione had not thought of such a thing. She had never even considered children in her future, nor wanted them. A sentiment she and the Duke shared. Even before the semi-scandal Hermione had stated her disposition as much, atoning it to one of the reasons she had not wished to wed.

Her hand fluttered towards her stomach. She was not daft; she knew very well that children were the outcome of intimacies. To some degree, at least. She had never finished that *charmingly* inappropriate book that Draco had given her and suddenly she felt as if she were lacking crucial details of the act.

“I do not think one discusses such things in proper company,” Hermione said flatly, a fake smile on her face as she set her cold tea down.

The other witch straightened as her dark eyes darted around them. They were indeed surrounded by mostly unmarried witches. While Hermione was aware of Pansy’s history, the others might not be apprised of the sordid details. Being who she had been to Draco, and how poorly Harry had reacted, she could guarantee that Pansy had been with Harry intimately. It may have been swept under the rug to spare her of a cruel fate because of her family and wealth, but it was damning. Hermione said nothing more. She would not rehash the past.

“Perhaps I could host a married witches evening, and when you are wed you can join us.” Hermione continued politely. She blotted the napkin at her lips as she turned her attention to her friend at her side, dismissing Pansy. “How are things with you, Ginny? Any new suitors?”

Her friend’s face turned a telling shadow of red, the color creeping up along her neck and ears. They both knew she had *had* only one suitor, and that it had been Harry. But his attention seemed to have shifted away from Ginny to another witch, and yet the fiery redhead had yet to complain. Which meant...

Hermione leaned closer to her friend, whispering, “Oh, do tell me who he is.”

Ginny’s fingers traced the delicate handle of her cup. “I mean, perhaps there is someone... perhaps. Time will tell.”

“But I am assuming you aren’t going to tell?”

The responding smirk was positively devious and Hermione rolled her eyes as she sat back in her seat.

The rest of the luncheon passed with uncomfortably forced small talk, where Hermione was only minimally spared by her friends leading the conversation for her. Which she was indeed grateful for, as she was not the best at navigating fine conversations and etiquette. Hermione wondered if she ever would be. Her time spent in the sitting room and reading over the Malfoy heritage revealed that almost every member of the family was of wealthy Pureblood and titled families. In fact, Hermione was one of the first Muggleborns to marry into the family.

To say she felt even further out of place by the discovery would be a bit of an understatement.

Furthering her readings into the Malfoy family, she came to the late Duke, Lucius Malfoy. Draco's father. Beside his name; *deceased. Cause of death: accidental magic expulsion.*

Hermione pondered what this meant, as there were no additional details to provide context. While death by magic was not unheard of, it was certainly uncommon enough to raise brows. She returned the books back to their place upon the shelves before she slipped down the main corridor. Here the walls were lined with portraits of family members past. The residences of the frames murmured amongst themselves as she walked. Most ignored her, their whispers growing silent until she had moved away. Several dared to hiss vile words at her.

Muggleborn.

Mudblood.

"How pleasant," Hermione muttered to herself as she ignored them. She had not grown up in their world and the words held only some weight. She knew what they meant, and how these witches and wizards viewed her.

It mattered not to her. They were dead, and she was not.

She was the current Duchess and while they may spit venom, she could have them hidden away or removed if they annoyed her too greatly. Perhaps that was why they ducked and whispered behind their hands. Why they had ignored her since her arrival. They thought she was beneath them, unworthy of her title.

Reaching the end of the portraits, she came to stop before the late Duke's frame. *Lucius Abraxas Malfoy* was engraved into a silver plaque beneath the beautiful crafted frame. And within the canvas, Lucius' likeness. Seated upon a chair that almost looked like a throne was the painted wizard. He was undoubtedly a handsome man. Perhaps a touch pale as it seemed the entire family had such fair skin. His hair was long, the platinum locks falling gently over her shoulders. His son resembled him in many ways; the sharp angles of his face, the piercing grey eyes.

Eyes that immediately fell to her as she folded her hands in front of her. She smiled up at the wizard as politely as she could, half expecting some remark. But he made none. He simply said nothing, lifting a dark brow at her.

"Your Grace," Hermione broke the silence.

Too impatient to play these silly games of the nobles, she just decided to venture forward. She was the Duchess, afterall.

“Miss Granger,” he drawled. His fingers drummed on his cane, topped with an intricately carved snake head. “To what do I owe the... *pleasure?*”

“It’s Your Grace, although I will allow Lady Malfoy,” Hermione couldn’t help herself with the correction. She had never been one for titles but if there ever was a moment to assert the weight and privilege behind the name, it was now.

“Indeed,” she swore he rolled his eyes, “How could I ever forget that my idiot son would dare taint the family line with a Mud—“

Her wand was in her hand before he could finish the insult. It flicked effortlessly through the air and his words were silenced. His eyes bulged slightly as his lips moved but no sound came forth.

She smiled pleasantly, “Indeed. It must have slipped your mind. Now, as the wife to your son and *Duchess* of Wiltshire, I have the ability to keep you mute. If I truly wished it, I could obscure your portrait— and the rest of those muttering arseholes—“ she gestured down the hall. The whispers had grown silent. “Or even have you all removed and replaced with some lovely scenic paintings. I would love to make this place much more airy and warm—“

Lucius was thumping his cane against the ground within the portrait, his frustration evident in the ruddy color of his face.

“But I could show mercy and allow you all to stay. *If* you swear to never utter another single curse towards myself.” Hermione paused in thought. “Or my parents, as they are bound to visit.”

His lips were moving but still no words came out.

Hermione twiddled her wand idly in her fingers as she smirked, “I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. You must speak up.”

Another thump of his cane.

She released the spell that had silenced him.

“You are a conniving little —“

“Ah ah!”

“Witch.” Lucius finished. His expression was filled with disdain as he looked at her through narrow eyes. “What is it you want? To rub in my face that my son has married outside of his social standing? That he has brought great *shame* to our family tree?”

Hermione lifted her wand in warning and the dead wizard scolded her, but fell silent.

“In part, perhaps I am doing just that because your entire family seems like such a pleasant bunch, but that is not my original intent.” She folded her arms. “I have come to ask some things.”

The former Duke lifted a perfectly defined brow. “Oh? Is the new *Lady* Malfoy asking questions? Could you not find what you sought amongst all those books in the prestigious Malfoy library?”

She resisted the urge to rub her brow. “Even in death you are so full of yourself. *No*, those books did not answer the questions that popped into my brain because it would not be found there, Your Grace. I am wondering why your son has such an aversion to the use of magic? Since I've arrived here, I have yet to witness him using any. I don't think he even carries his wand with him. Is there a reason for this?”

It was something she had noticed almost immediately, but something she had not dared to ask Draco directly. Hermione knew she could ask him and he most likely would answer her. They were both straightforward that she did not think he would lie. But what if it was a point of shame?

Adjusting within his frame, the Duke seemed to consider her and her words. As if battling with himself to tell her the truth and satisfy her curiosity, or keep it to himself. “My son was — *is* — a skilled wizard. There was an incident a few years ago that occurred that made him hang up his robes, so to speak.”

“Well, what was it?” Hermione asked, rather impatiently.

He lifted a shoulder in a slight shrug, a smug look of indifference upon his face. “Perhaps you should ask your husband, Your Grace.”

~*~

“So, how is the wonderful wedded life?” Theo asked as he stretched his legs out before him. Seated within Draco's parlor, the other wizard looked up from the row of cards in his hand.

“Are you actually interested in the answer or are you merely trying to distract me from the game since I know your hand is piss poor and I'm about to take your galleons?” Draco drawled.

Theo switched some of his cards around in his hand as his eyes scanned the table between them. He was indeed losing this round and with a handsome pile of coins in the middle, about to lose a hefty chunk of change.

“A bit of both,” he admitted. “More curious as to why you have not said anything at all on the matter. You were so against the idea of marriage and yet have not uttered a single

complaint. But neither have you said anything positive on the matter. Are things not well between the two of you or...?"

Draco's eyes peered at him from over the cards, "There are no complaints. It's your turn."

"And how is the *relations* aspect of the marriage? You had her as your mistress so I assume she was no virgin. So there must be *some* positives—"

"Play your cards, Theodore." Draco rolled his eyes as he leaned back in his seat.

Theo pressed on. "So, not bad then. That's good. And no arguments, either? How is your mother adjusting to life as a Dowager? How is the Lady Granger adjusting to being a Duchess?"

Throwing his cards onto the table, Draco reached for his glass. The fire whiskey was scorching as it worked its way down his throat. "Hermione is doing just fine in her new role. My mother has taken quite a shine to the witch. Shocking, I know. My father's portrait, on the other hand, likes to come in here and complain incessantly."

Placing his cards facedown on the table, Theo considered his friend. "And any word on an heir? I assume it is expected of you now that you have wed? I am aware you said you did not want children but—"

"There will be no heir, Theo. Not now, or ever."

"Er, how is that? If you two are—"

Draco rolled his eyes as he raked his fingers through his hair. "I simply do not finish inside her. Neither of us fancy children and she does not seem to notice or care that I do this."

Theo was quiet for a moment as he studied his friend. The way his jaw briefly ticked before he responded, how he had taken another big swig of his glass, and the simple fidgeting of his fingers on his cufflinks. Something about his behavior was off, as if his words did not quite match his thoughts. Perhaps they did not match his own heart.

"You know they have a potion for that, right? Or a spell, if you ever decide to use magic again," Theo said quietly. He would let the subject lie as it was for now and not press Draco for more. There had been a touch of bitterness to his words that held Theo's tongue at bay. Instead he turned over his cards and flashed a cheeky grin. "Guess you cleaned house this evening."

The Tree

Chapter Notes

TW: discussion about pregnancy

Hermione stared at the empty seat at the head of the table. Draco had been away in London for three days. Three days that felt like an eternity. She could not help but wonder what kept him away; he could easily return by floo or with magic. Her fork pushed her carrots around her plate as she thought to herself that he did not *use* magic. Not often.

Rarely, even.

She could count on one hand the number of times he had used it.

Nonetheless, the carriage ride from London to the Wiltshire Estate was but a few hours. So what was keeping him. She knew nothing of what a Duke had to do to run his estate or his day to day living— perhaps it was her fault for not inquiring. But as was commonplace, Hermione did not have the authority to deal with such things. As a wife, it was not her place. It was a *man's*.

She scowled at her plate.

But she knew that Draco had been indulgent in including her with the ongoings of the estate and finances. Yet, this time she had not heard anything, nothing more than an owl flopping through an open window and the Duke leaving posthaste.

Perhaps he had returned to his old dalliances.

She felt the blood draining from her face at the thought. At the reality of it. The Duke had been a notorious rake. A terrible flirt that had witches fawning over him. He had never truly said he would denounce his old ways. Perhaps with being forced to wed her, it had opened the door for him to move a new mistress into what was supposed to have been her home.

Hermione stabbed the carrot with enough force that the metal tines grated on the fine china, causing Narcissa to gasp loudly.

“My dear, are you quite alright?” The dowager asked with wide eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione apologized hastily, exhaling her frustrations. She felt heated, a dull thud filling her chest like a vacuum. “I must not be feeling quite myself.”

Narcissa was quiet for a moment as she looked at her, shrewd blue eyes sharp like shards of ice. Calculating. She slowly lowered her silverware onto the table. “Outbursts during the first few weeks are understandable.”

Setting her own fork down, Hermione nodded her head. “You’re right. We are newly wed. I was uprooted from my home and brought here, and expected to become a proper Duchess—“

“That’s not what I meant,” Narcissa corrected softly.

“Then what did you mean?” Hermione felt a frown tugging at her lips as she looked at the older witch.

“The first trimester of pregnancy.”

Hermione stared at the witch for a hard moment. For some unfathomable reason, she had not even thought of such a concept. It had not even remotely crossed her mind that she could even be pregnant.

“I’m not pregnant.” She stated numbly.

Narcissa’s face softened. The servant rushed forward as she started to stand, pulling her chair back for her. “There is something you have to see.”

Her legs felt like lead as Hermione followed the dowager from the dining hall. They walked in silence down the corridor, passing by numerous rooms she had never bothered to explore until she was led into a sitting room. It was just past the portraits of long gone Duke’s, most of which scowled at her but said nothing. Entering the mostly unused room, Narcissa led her to a tapestry that covered the entirety of one wall. Dark green in color, it was hemmed in silver stitching. An ancient tree had been woven into the fabric, branches winding off in all sorts of directions. On each of the branches were names and small likenesses denoting the lineage of the great Malfoy name. Hermione had seen something similar at Harry’s townhome; a family tree with moving faces and names, constantly growing as the family grew.

Coming to stop at one of the far branches, Narcissa motioned to her son’s woven portrait and name. Hermione moved closer, surprised to see the addition of her name beside his, their images connected together with mahogany vines. A single branch had grown out from between theirs, a leaf unfurling at the end as if it were stretching towards the imaginary sun.

“There’s a new leaf,” Narcissa said quietly. “They usually mean the couple is expecting.”

Dumbfounded, Hermione stared at the leaf as if she expected to see a child’s face to form. She shook her head slowly, “I don’t think this is the case, Narcissa. I haven’t experienced any symptoms.”

The witch hesitated a little, “Have you had your menses lately?”

Hermione paused, mentally counting in her mind. She was late. By a couple weeks, in fact. With the stress of everything, she had not even noticed the time lapse. “Not for a while,” she

eventually admitted.

“How about I summon the family mediwitch and we can verify one way or another, if only to alleviate the uncertainty,” Narcissa offered calmly. Still too stunned to speak, Hermione could only nod numbly at the suggestion.

~*~

For a modest sense of decorum purposes, one of the house elves had apparated Hermione’s mother to the estate so she could sit in the room during the exam with the mediwitch. The examination was rather straightforward, perhaps a touch awkward, but was overly quick. As Hermione adjusted her skirts and sat at the foot of her bed, she waited for the mediwitch to finish putting away her utensils.

Draped in white robes, the witch tucked away her wand before turning to address Hermione. “You are not pregnant.”

For a brief moment, Hermione felt torn between relief and disappointment.

Relief because she had never truly thought of having children of her own, not this young at any rate. Disappointment because she knew, given her new status as a Duchess, that it was expected of her to provide an heir and by not doing so, would garnish gossip.

Not that she cared much for gossip but... since the wedding, something had shifted. There was a change, new expectations. Almost a drive had developed within her to go above and beyond and exceed all those demands and predictions of her in this new role. And while she did not *want* children, it was now part of this position. One that she would perfect.

Her mother was the one who responded, “So, she is not with child?”

The mediwitch shook her head. “No. My belief is that this lapse between menses is due to outside factors such as stress.” Shrewd eyes looked at Hermione. Not unkind nor judging, but eyes that seemed to read her. “You are newly wed, yes? And new to the titled position you are now in?”

Hermione nodded her head, trying to focus on the positive. She should be able to breathe a sigh of relief at the affirmation she was still free of the duties of having a child. “Yes, the Duke and I married but a couple weeks ago.” She motioned to her mother, “I am Muggleborn.”

The witch hummed her acknowledgment as her quill scratched across the floating parchment beside her. “Yes, yes. I see. Stress can cause significant delays in your cycle, sometimes up to

six weeks. Also intercourse, oddly enough, can delay it. There is a surge of hormones and until your body adjusts to this rush, it will cause an imbalance.” Hermione felt her face burning, avoiding looking anywhere but at the mediwitch. Her fingers clenched together in her lap. “But in due time, or perhaps as the honeymoon period ends, you will find things returning to normal.” The witch tapped the quill against the parchment. “Other than that, you appear quite healthy and able to bear children.”

Finding it best not to voice her thoughts on that, Hermione merely remained quiet. The mediwitch most likely would not share her opinion on childbearing and rearing. Especially as she was married to a Duke, it was expected of Hermione to give Draco an heir. It was expected of *him*, as well. It was why both had never wished to marry; one would have demands due to their title, the other would be forced to acquiesce to them.

“I recommend bed rest. Coupled with perhaps some activities to help bring you peace such as embroidery, or a walk in the gardens.” With a flick of the mediwitch’s wand, the parchment rolled up and quill disappeared into her bag. “Is His Grace home? I can relay the message to him.”

Hermione frowned. “I can tell Dra— my husband on my own.”

“Very well,” the witch briefly looked to Hermione’s mother, “Have a good day, Ladies. Do not hesitate to summon me should there be any changes.” And she apparated away with a crack.

~*~

“I was notified there was a mediwitch here earlier today, are you alright?” Draco asked as he stepped into the foyer, the air crackling around him as his magic faded.

Hermione gaped at him for a moment. She had been passing the foyer, book in hand. His appearance at the moment had been purely coincidental. The book now forgotten in her hand, she realized that he had apparated directly into his home.

“You’re home.” She stated quietly.

He frowned as he approached her. “Yes, I owled you to say I was stuck in London a few days. But when my mother sent word of the witch, I had to come back to make sure you are okay.”

“I’m quite alright. Did her letter not say what it was for?” She asked.

Draco shook his head, his cane hooked on the corner of his elbow. “No, merely that she had been summoned. Is something the matter?”

She hesitated a little, momentarily torn between telling him what had been the cause for worry. Would he feel relief as well? Or would he be upset that she had not fulfilled her part of

the marriage? No matter his expectations, they both knew what was demanded of her in this society.

“I’ve missed my… time of the month,” she finally said in a hushed tone, feeling heat on her cheeks.

His head tipped slightly, his eyes darkening as he seemed to consider her. For a moment, she felt as if a coldness had slipped into place. “That’s not possible.”

Hermione shook her head, “No, you’re right. I’m not pregnant, I’m just stressed but—“ she paused, finally processing his words. “What do you mean, it’s ‘*not possible?*’ We’ve had…” Hermione lowered her voice to a whisper as she glanced towards the portraits on the walls, “*relations.*”

“Did you not read the book I lent to you in its entirety?”

“What? No, I glimpsed a few interesting passages and I figured you would teach me the rest,” Hermione replied quickly, her face positively on fire now. Somehow it felt as if this were not the place for such an intimate and private conversation.

“I’ve been pulling out every time, Hermione. There is no way for you to get pregnant without my seed,” he replied levelly, his expression impassive. He almost looked *annoyed* with her.

Hermione felt genuine confusion at his statement. She was aware that she was finishing from their coupling, and she had been sure he was finding just as much enjoyment from it as her. “What do you mean?”

“I pull out before I finish.” Draco replied in a sharp whisper.

There was the faint taste of betrayal at his words. A stinging realization that every time they had come together, she had reached the pinnacle on her own and he had not done so once with her. Every moment she had thought they were one united, she now realized she had been alone. Her spine straightened as she tried to push down the bitter taste in her mouth. While it may be that she had not wanted children, she felt miffed that he had not even bothered to ask her consent on such a matter. That he had denied her of the option. What if she *had* changed her mind? They had not discussed it, true, but they both knew it was expected of her.

“While I’m sure there is more to it than that, I don’t feel the foyer is the proper place to discuss this any further, Your Grace,” Hermione uttered quietly. *Numbly*. How could she feel betrayed when this was simply something that both had agreed upon? Perhaps that was the unnerving part of everything. “I need a moment.”

She was already starting to retreat, “What?” Draco asked in concern, that aloof expression vanishing.

“I said I need a moment,” she hissed as she turned and fled.

~*~

Draco stared at the spot where Hermione had stood just moments ago. His *wife*. The look of utter devastation and hurt in her eyes had rooted him to the spot. It had caught him off guard: had they both not said they did not wish to have children? How had she not been *aware* that he was not finishing inside her? He could have sworn she would have known such a simple thing.

Perhaps he had made an error to not tell her of the method. He could have used contraceptive potion or even magic, but that felt even more a violation of her autonomy. And if he were honest with himself, he had assumed she would have been taking a contraceptive potion with her sheer vehemence against children. Given the fact that she had wished to become *his mistress*, it would have been in that line of work and made sense.

It seemed he had judged poorly in this situation, or simply overlooked it.

With the excitement of the wedding and weeks of the honeymoon, it had not truly crossed his mind to even broach the subject.

Yet here they were now, in the foyer of his home discussing the tender topic as if it were not some life altering subject.

Did she suddenly wish to have children?

Was she upset that he had denied her of that?

Or was she upset because she had not known of this simple method?

He was tempted to follow her but somehow he knew it best not to push his luck with the witch, less he wished to be hexed by her. He gave one more long look at the corridor she had disappeared down before he snapped away, his magic swallowing him and bringing him back to London.

~*~

Ginny watched from her picnic blanket that lay on the trimmed grass of the park as a handsome carriage rolled up to the Malfoy townhome. The black stallions that pulled it danced impatiently while the footman leapt off the back and with a wave of his wand, steps appeared just as the door opened. Hermione stepped out, ignoring the hand that the footman offered as she shook out her riding skirts.

“The couple must be returning to London to finish the season,” Ginny said quietly, to herself more than her current company.

Theo sipped his tea as he watched. “Hm, I don’t think so. That’s the Dowager.”

Sure enough, the Dowager Duchess had stepped down behind her, though she did use the footman's aide to descend the steps gracefully.

“Surely the Duke is there as well,” Ginny replied.

The footman removed the steps and shut the door. The carriage rolled away. Ginny frowned. She had not spoken to her friend since the garden party, for she had felt that the two needed to enjoy their wedding bliss as long as possible. She turned and motioned for her maid. The young witch shuffled forward and bent down. Ginny whispered into her ear and the witch nodded her head. As soon as her brief picnic with the Earl was concluded, the maid would slip away to do some inquiries amongst the households— this was usually done at the market.

“Hm,” Theo made a noncommittal sound from behind his cup. He had been sipping his tea for an unusually long time and Ginny narrowed her eyes on him.

“You know something, don’t you?”

His brows lifted. “Do I?”

“You *do*!” Ginny gasped, affronted he had not offered to share the tea with her.

A slow sip. “Perhaps.”

If they were not in public, she would have chucked her hat at him. “Spill everything.”

“Isn’t she *your* friend? Can you not just ask her?” He pointed out as he finally lowered his cup. It was nearly comical to see the tall Earl folded into a seated position upon the blanket, yet he had not argued her request. In fact, he seemed quite content to gander at the wandering witches and wizards around them. Ginny knew, even as an Earl, that Theo had a fairly busy schedule. Her brother’s had said as much; with the passing of his father and his mother long since gone, he now ran his entire estate and finances without help. She could not imagine the amount of stress and pressure the wizard was under and perhaps this was a literal and mental breath of fresh air.

“I’ve given her time to enjoy her...” Ginny waved a hand as she tried to find the politest words, “*Time* with the Duke. When I was there in her company last, everything seemed quite on par. As if they were truly—“

“In love?” Theo finished.

“I mean, they are, are they not?”

“Obviously.” Theo drawled as he stretched out his long legs before him, leaning back on his hands. He looked fetching in his tailored suit, his hat forgotten in the grass beside them.

“But if we were to ask them...”

“They would deny it, obviously.” He finished again.

“Of course they would. They are both so thick-skulled. I wonder what is going on that caused her to appear without him.” Ginny questioned aloud, staring at the home in thought where the two witches had gone inside moments before.

Marital Bliss

Dearest Readers,

*Marital bliss eludes some, it seems.
While it had appeared we may have had a love match of the season,
There seems to be trouble in paradise.
The young Duke has been residing in his London home for several days; And his wife is no
where to be seen?
Perhaps this was an arrangement and we have all been fooled.
Alas, the young Duchess has returned from the countryside as well.*

Only time will tell what unfolds.

*In the meantime, it seems there is new romance budding.
The only daughter of the Weasley's seems to have caught the eye of a very well-to-do wizard.*

Your forever watchful,

Lady Quibbler

~*~

Draco stopped mid stride as the foyer door opened and a footman carrying trunks and luggage entered the townhome. Promptly following them was his mother. She glided into the space, every inch the Dowager Duchess. Her travel gown was perfectly neat and proper, her hair untouched and braided. She looked flawless, just as she always did. And behind her tramped in his wife. Much unlike her mother-in-law, it was obvious Hermione was quite uncomfortable and miserable. Forced into a rich travel gown, she looked as if she were in physical pain. Her face had a sheen of sweat upon her brow and her hair was becoming a touch frizzy from the humidity.

“What are you two doing here?” Draco could not help but ask. His mother seemed to float over to him, presenting her cheek. He pressed a chaste kiss to her pale skin and she excused her without bothering to answer his inquiry.

“Is this not my home as well?” Hermione stated as she folded her arms. He could not help but feel that had his mother not accompanied his wife, Hermione would have come in with her

wand blazing and a hex thrown at his head.

“Of course it is. I would have just expected an owl or a heads up—“

“For what reason? Do I have to get permission to come here? Do you have a new mistress I must tiptoe around?” For a moment, she looked hurt at the thought but her expression quickly composed, revealing nothing further.

He sighed, suddenly realizing what she must be thinking; of his sudden absence, of his time away, of his control when they were intimate. He waited until the footman and loitering maids left and they were alone- well, as alone as one could be in a home filled with gossip hungry portraits. Draco stepped towards her, holding his hand out.

“Come with me, Hermione.”

For a moment, he doubted she would acquiesce. Perhaps he thought she might storm off to prove some point, proceed to stomp up to the bedroom where she assumed she would find the worst. But her gloved hand fell into his.

Without a word, he led her down the corridor to his office. Within the space was what one might call organized chaos. Books upon books were open, alongside various ledgers and parchments with half scrolled numbers and figures that made his eyes turn crossway. He waved a hand towards the mess, revealing ink stained fingers.

“This is what I’ve been doing. My father’s records. He was... embezzling money from the Ministry. I noticed some discrepancies between ledges. Numbers and investments that did not add up to the year end costs. Money stolen and owed to some very notorious members of both our world and the Muggle one,” Draco said quietly. Her face fell from stone to confused, and then realization.

“So what does that mean? For you?” She asked quietly.

Draco sighed as he raked his fingers through his hair. “I haven’t told Mother yet. I’m not sure I should. She loved my father, and I would rather keep the memory untarnished for her. But I need to consult a banker at Gringotts on this matter. Or perhaps a new estate manager— I can not trust the one my father had hired as they may very well be aware of this, even assisted in this treachery. At least some of it, I feel, can be repaid.”

“So, this is what’s kept you away from me this entire time?” She turned to look up at him.

He nodded his head slightly, “and did not dare put it in a letter.”

“I can understand why,” Hermione admitted quietly. She let out a slow sigh, her shoulders dropping as if some weight had been lifted. “So, you merely have financial problems, not a mistress?”

Draco let out a laugh, “is one worse than the other?”

“I mean...” her words were cut short as he yanked her forward and into his arms, his lips brushing against hers in a questioning kiss. She resisted, for but a second as if she meant to

slap him silly for interrupting her, and then she melted.

The kiss was soft, her lips eager and pliant beneath his. He felt her fingers curling into the lapel of his shirt, felt her rise up onto her toes as she pressed her lips to his more eagerly. His hands skated along her back to her waist, and he frowned a little at the arm boning he felt beneath his palms. He pushed her back down onto the soles of her feet.

“Are you wearing a *corset*?” He frowned as his fingers slipped along each of the structured ridges hidden beneath her gown. She had never worn one before.

“It’s required of me as a Duchess—” she began but he shook his head.

“You are a Duchess, Hermione. My Duchess. And nothing, I repeat *nothing*, is required of you. *You* are the fashion icon now and you do not need to abide by other tittering witches’ demands.” Her face had become a charming shade of pink at his words. His fingers traced the modest neckline of her gown, “But tell me, do you enjoy this gown? It is rather fetching on you, but...”

Hermione shook her head slowly and his finger hooked the edge, fingertip nestled between her breasts. “No?” He asked again, one dark brow rising. Again, she shook her head. “Very well, it’ll look better on the floor anyway.”

“Excuse me—?” She began to protest, but before she could stop him— not that she truly was putting up an argument— Draco yanked the gown sharply, enough so that the delicate fabric tore down along her stomach. She let out a startled gasp, glancing towards the door. “But what if someone sees?”

“It’s our house. They should learn to mind their business,” he kissed her fiercely as his hands pushed the sleeves down from her arms, the fabric bunch at her waist. His fingers found the lacework at the back of her corset, and he deftly untied it. He felt the moment the pressure on her ribs eased, felt her deep exhale of relief mirroring in himself. He could not imagine being *forced* to wear such barbaric restrictions, no matter how expected they were in society or how flattering they might be. He knew his witch did not like the appeal or lack of comfort the damned things offered.

His hands smoothed along her bare back, rubbing away the creases left behind in her delicate skin from the contraption, pulling her tight to his chest with each stroke of his fingers. Her breasts were still covered by the front of the corset, which she clung to with some silly sense of decency. His mouth left hers, kissing along her jaw. Her head tilted back, exposing her throat to him. He teased his lips along the most sensitive skin below her ear, along her racing pulse. She felt her hands wandering holding, pulling his shirt from his trousers while one hand palmed the growing bulge there.

“I’ve missed you,” he groaned against the crook of her neck. “I need you, Hermione.”

Her fingers stroked the length of his growing shaft in response, her breathing rapid. He could have sworn he heard her mumble something in return, but anything she may have said was silenced by the blood rushing to his ears sounded like the crashing of waves. His hands moved lower to her hips, gripping them as he pushed her back towards the desk. Hermione

moved willingly, letting him guide her until her derrière bumped into his desk. He turned her around, their hands working together to pull her skirts up. Beneath she wore comfortable undergarments; simple white knickers and stockings to keep her legs warm during the carriage ride. He hastily unbuttoned his trousers, freeing himself. She was damp already, the little spot forming on the gusset of her knickers giving her need away. Draco pulled them to the side, revealing her to him. She looked so ready for him, so *perfect*.

He groaned in desire, lining himself up.

“Are you ready for me, Princess?” He leaned over to whisper into her ear. “Please say yes.”

Hermione nodded her head, pushing herself back against him. Draco barely held back his moan as he eased into her. He could not put into words how right she felt for him, how exquisite she was for him. He sank into her, enjoying the feel of her walls wrapping around him. The quiet sigh that fell from her lips as he filled her sent a shiver through his body.

He braced his hands on the desk on either side of her, uncaring of the books that clattered to the floor as her hips knocked into the edge with each thrust. A part of him, a very small one, wondered if they should have shut the door but another part enjoyed the thrill of being caught.

Each time he filled her with his length, he drew out a small moan from Hermione’s lip. Little mewls of pleasure.

It did not take long for Draco to reach his climax; so wound up and stressed, he found his relief quickly. He pulled himself from her just before he could finish, coating the back of her thighs with his release. He pressed a kiss to the tender spot between her shoulder blades before he stepped away to grab his discarded robes, gently wiping her clean. She had not moved from the desk, her forehead pressed against the cover of a book.

For a moment, Draco felt a touch of sadness come from her; normally she would bounce right back up and press a kiss to his cheek before flouncing away. And yet... she had not done so. He adjusted her knickers for her in silence.

When she finally straightened, letting her skirts fall to cover herself, there was a touch of disappointment in her eyes, her lips were a thin line.

“You pulled out again.” Was her simple statement.

He threw his robe aside as he adjusted his trousers. He did not respond as he turned away.

If he had to admit it, he was in no mood to discuss his decision on not having children. They had both said this before marriage and his stance had not changed on it; and finding evidence of his father’s embezzlement and the fact he had been willing to put his entire family and fortune on the line for some extra coffers to line his pockets... Draco could not imagine bringing a child into a family with such a scandal attached.

“I assume you’ll be joining me for dinner this evening?” Draco instead asked. He kept his head turned so as not to look at her. He could not face that look of hurt he knew was there. “I

usually indulge myself by dining in the Eastern Wing garden terrace, but I can move to the dining hall.

Hermione was silent for a beat. He could see her wand was now out, and she was actively fixing her gown. The fabric was closing at the seam, as if he had never torn it.

“Let me—” he moved to offer to tie her corset but she stepped away.

“I shall see you later, Your Grace.” She swept from the room without further word or even a glance in his direction. Her dismissal was louder than any words she could have said.

~*~

Later that evening, his wife did not join him for dinner. His mother, on the other hand, did. Prim and proper as always, she looked pointedly at the empty seat where Hermione would have settled into at the other end of the table.

“I am assuming you two have already come across your first bit of differences?” Narcissa asked quietly, her brows lifting. The corners of her eyes crinkled and Draco scolded at her amusement at his cost.

“Hush up, Mother. We are perfectly amicable,” He replied as he stabbed his fork into his steak.

“Oh, yes. I can tell.” She responded quietly, that knowing smirk still hovering on her lips.

Draco set down his fork as he leveled a look on her. “Is there something you wish to say, Mother? Some wise words of marriage?”

Because yours was so perfect, he wanted to add, but he could never be so cruel to his mother.

Their marriage had been arranged. They had been friends, of a sort. And Narcissa had been fiercely loyal to her husband. But he had not been to her and as she seemed unaware of the impending financial doom hanging over their heads, not entirely honest with her either. His father had been a cruel Pureblooded wizard, one that had frowned down on the mingling of any MuggleBorns into their society. His mother had always argued against this, and taught Draco to not uphold those same values.

“Hermione is a young girl, Draco. Who has been thrust into a world that she never imagined to be in,” Narcissa said slowly. “You both are young. There are a lot of responsibilities and expectations on the both of you. And I think that is something you need to consider.”

Draco drummed his fingers on the table. “I am well aware of what is expected of me, Mother. I’ve never been allowed to forget.”

“I meant of *her*. She did not grow up with the same expectations and might be a touch... overwhelmed? Don’t you think?” When Draco did not immediately respond to his mother’s words, she slammed her teacup down with enough force to splash tea over the rim. “Bloody hell, Draco! Go talk to her!”

~*~

Hermione did not bother to touch her tea, the steam rising into the air as she looked at Theo across from her. He had folded himself into one of the delicate chairs of her sitting room, looking large and out of place in the flowery space.

“You summoned me, Your Grace?” Theo sipped his tea, a touch louder than necessary.

“I did,” Hermione folded her hands in her lap. “I need you to get a book for me.”

To his credit, Theo looked momentarily confused. “You’re a Duchess. You can easily acquire any book you so wish. You don’t need to ask *me*—“

“It’s at the Parkinson townhome.”

He paused mid sip, his brows lifting. “Indeed?”

Hermione slipped a folded note across the table. On it, she had written the title of the book and its approximate location in the library. His interest was piqued even further as he read it, his eyes widening.

“Your Grace... I am not sure if such a book is suitable for—“

“Don’t play stupid, Theodore. You know very well I had intended to be the Duke’s mistress, not his wife. As such, and as I am married to him, I now have a carnal knowledge of such things.” Hermione stated.

“If that is the case, why is it you need such a book?” He countered, even as he slipped the paper into his pocket.

“I want to know why he refuses to... *Finish*. You’re his closest friend; do you know why?” Hermione questioned pointedly. She felt as if she had little to be embarrassed about. She needed answers and yet even when she had voiced her concern directly to Draco, he had continued to elude her, denying her answer. She was aware that they did not want children, but it felt as if he were removing the option entirely. Perhaps one day she would change her mind and want them, but if he were so against it then there were other issues abound.

Theo choked on his tea at her words, the tips of his ears burning red. “That is not something I can disclose.”

“So you do know, then.”

“Ask your husband.”

“I confronted him.”

“And?”

“He did not give me a real answer.”

Theo shrugged. “Maybe in time—“

“I want to know now.” She would not budge. She had to know.

He shook his head. “And you think this *book* will help answer it for you?”

“I think the book will give me pointers on how to take control of the situation.”

His eyes narrowed in warning, his voice lowering. “If you try to *force* him—“

Hermione lifted a hand to silence him. “I will not. I would never do that. I want to know my options. Many witches and wizards have sex and do not get pregnant. So there are ways. I need to show him that we can be fully, wholeheartedly, intimate with one another. Without the risk of unwanted pregnancy.”

Theo slid his palm across his face with a groan. “Your Grace, I’m not sure—“

She reached across the table to grip his hand, her voice pleading. “Please, Theo. I cannot be in a marriage and only have my husband give a part of himself to me. I want... I want more. I want Draco. All of him.”

With that bit out of the way, Hermione turned the discussion to her dear friend Ginny, enjoying watching Theo squirm in his seat. Of course the pair had thought she should not notice their sudden blossoming friendship— if one could call it that. If the Lady Quibbler had caught wind of their shenanigans, it was most certainly more than innocent meetings. Despite her proddings, Theo never admitted to courting her friend.

Finished with the tea and gossip, Hermione walked him to the foyer to say their goodbyes. She thanked him again and he left.

“Why was Theo here?” Draco asked as he appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

Hermione turned to look at her husband, taking in his somewhat defensive posture. He had dressed neatly, his robes pressed and to the height of comfortable fashion. His blond hair was swept back from his face, but not kept neat but a bit disheveled. He looked.. well, charming. Roguishly so.

“I asked him to stop in for a quick word,” Hermione replied lightly. He seemed to accept the answer, dismissing it entirely.

“You missed dinner.” His fingers drummed on the railing.

“Did I?”

He gave her a skeptical look.

She sighed, folding her arms over her chest. “Very well, yes I did. I must admit I did not quite wish to see you after earlier.”

“Because of what happened in my study?” He asked quietly as he stepped towards her, stopping a respectable distance away..

Hermione shrugged a little as she looked at one of the portraits on the wall. She had no wish to discuss what had transpired between them so openly with a plethora of bored portraits just waiting for a tidbit of gossip. *Especially* the ones that loitered the halls of any of the Malfoy residence. Somehow she knew most of them disliked her, just as the ones at the Wiltshire Estate had. Which was why she had several covered or removed entirely from rooms she frequented.

Draco let out a slow sigh as he closed the distance between them. He held out his hand for her, his expression softening. “It’s late. Let us go to bed, Hermione.”

It was her turn to hesitate now, but again she felt herself letting that defensive nature of hers relax. Settling her hand into his, her wedding ring glimmered in the light from the chandelier above. She had to admit she was exhausted, and even though she might be miffed at Draco, she desperately wanted to fall into bed with him.

Without a word, his fingers closed over hers and he gently tugged her close. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, the faintest brush of his lips that sent a shiver through her. One of contentment. A whisper of happiness, of promises. Butterflies danced within her stomach; echoing of something more she dared not look into or question.

“Let me hold you in my arms tonight, let it just be the two of us. Forget about everything, about our responsibilities or what’s expected of us.” His lips were featherlight and teasing against her temple and she enjoyed the simple intimacy.

In hindsight, it was a good thing Hermione had not become his mistress.

Because she was falling in love with her husband.

Matters of the Estate

Chapter Notes

Possible TW: mentions of child death

The pressing matters of the state of the Malfoy financial affairs took precedence over the following days. Unwilling to bring his mother into the matters at hand about his father's sordid misdealing, Draco found himself in his office with his wife. Blessed be that he had wed someone intelligent and quick witted. She had a natural aptitude for finances and was quick to find every minor nuance between the records; unpaid debts or monies that had been siphoned off to some unknown source.

"You're father was a busy man," Hermione muttered as she scrawled a new note onto the parchment beside her.

"I had an entire estate to run," the portrait of the wizard in question chimed from a silver frame over the mantle. "Do you have any idea—"

"Gambling debts are not included in the running of a house, Lucius," Hermione scolded the former Duke without looking up from the parchment in front of her.

Lucius' portrait scoffed, "and how would you know? You are but a poor—"

"*Father*," Draco warned, glaring at the portrait. His finger marked the line in the page he was reviewing. "Do not insult my wife, the Duchess, *again*."

"I merely meant to say that she comes from a small household that cannot comprehend the wealth and complexity—" Hermione flicked her wand and a cloth fell over the canvas, muffling the late Duke's voice.

"Why must he be here?" Hermione hissed as she set her wand back down, ignoring the continued muffled complaints of the painting. "He is far from helpful."

Draco looked across the table at his wife, "because he *could* be helpful. If he chooses to be, of course. Rather than just tell us who he owes these debts to, he is letting us waste our time weeding through countless years of records, watching us try to decipher this mess on our own."

"It's a bonding experience," came the muffled voice of Lucius.

"Arse," Hermione hissed in frustration. She scowled and tapped her quill against her parchment. "So far I have an unpaid debt owed to Nott Senior— alas, he is deceased so I am sure you can discuss this with the Viscount himself. There is a large sum that is owed to the

McLaggen family it seems, this is a running total so far as I keep finding more. What kind of gambling was your father into?"

"He enjoyed horse races and dueling," Draco answered quietly, making a mental note to call on both Theo and Cormac Senior to settle those unpaid debts.

"It appears your father was *investing* in a couple... Muggle operations? Seems to be a paper mill here and some other unknown factory. Perhaps this was how he was hiding his earnings and poor sense of judgment?" Hermione tapped the page where she was reading. Lucius' portrait scoffed loudly from under the sheet hiding him from view.

Draco had come around the desk, leaning over her shoulder to look at what she was pointing at. His hands braced on the surface on either side of her, boxing her in. She felt his chest against the back of her head, his faint minty fresh scent teasing her nostrils. Hermione inhaled quietly, letting her eyes close for the briefest of moments.

"I'll look into those. Good catch, wife." The timbre of his voice sent a shiver down her spine and heat to pool between her legs.

It should be a sin to be aroused so easily.

"Yes, thank you," Hermione tried to play it off but her voice was breathless. She was still rather miffed at him, as well. She needed to remember that. She jotted down on the parchment beside her the two references she had found.

Draco's hand covered hers, his thumb teasing along the inside curve of her thumb and forefinger. He traced along an ink stain, tutting quietly under his breath. "I should have entrusted you with this from the beginning."

She shivered at the simple touch. "Yes, you should have."

"My smart, brilliant wife," he muttered lowly into her ear.

"Draco."

He tugged the quill out of her hand and dropped it on the desktop, ignoring the splotch of ink that would inevitably stain the wood. "Hmm?"

"We should focus," Hermione pointed out half heartedly.

"We've been focusing for hours," he retorted as his fingers slipped along her palm, teasing the sensitive skin there. "Mother is out at the market—"

"You really should tell your mother—"

"About the sex? She is no fool. I rather think she keeps away because—"

"*No!* Not that, dear heavens, are you mad?" Hermione felt her face growing hot as she tried to pivot in her seat to face her husband. "This financial situation. Maybe she was aware of it, or can offer some insight."

Draco frowned down at her. "I've told you why I have not told her."

"Your mother is not some simpering ninny, Draco. She can handle the truth and in fact may have known about it. She's been the Duchess—"

"Hermione."

She persisted. "You know I'm right. You don't have to try and sort this out alone. You even said so yourself."

Draco shook his head as he stepped back. "The less people involved in this matter, the better. I would like to keep it as private as possible."

"Who is your mother going to tell? Your dead father's portrait? She does not remind me of a gossip."

"*Hermione*. Enough." He said sternly, frowning down at her. "I said no. I know you cannot possibly understand the gravity of this situation, but it's bloody shameful to the Malfoy name. If I cannot clean this up, there will forever be a stain on my— *our*— name."

Hermione drummed her fingers against the arms of the chair as she held his gaze. She felt her jaw tick at his backhanded insult. She was trying desperately not to bite at it, or let herself become riled but it was a losing battle. "I won't understand, why? Because I'm not in the same standing class as you? Is that it? Or is it because I'm Muggleborn?"

He raked his fingers through his hair, expelling a rush of air in frustration. "No! Bloody hell, no. That has nothing to do with it. I don't give a flying fig that you are Muggleborn, Hermione."

"So then it's my social status."

"You did not grow up with the same expectations and demands that I did," Draco said quietly. "You do not come from a prominent family, nor do you have anything to lose."

Rising to her feet, she looked up at him. "You're right, I did not grow up like you. I'm glad of it. But I also have everything to lose, Draco. I married you, and by that marriage I have as much at stake as you do now. I know I said I hated the bloody social standings and titles, but that does not mean I would not fight for them if they were to become mine. This is not yours to bear alone."

"It is my duty as the Duke to do so," Draco replied quietly, holding her gaze.

"And it is my duty as your wife to support you in all the ways I am able," she whispered, her tone fierce. "I am not some simpering maid, Draco. Nor should you tiptoe and treat me as such."

She swept from the room with those words still echoing in his mind.

The library was quiet as Draco slipped in. Rays of sunlight streamed in through the windows; while the townhouse was nowhere near as opulent as Wiltshire Manor, there was still a resplendent library. One of the largest rooms in the home, just after the dining and dance halls, it remained on his favorite places to lurk.

But Draco was not here to find a book.

He was looking for his wife.

His mothers advice still harped on him; he needed to sit down and talk to her. Every fiber of his being balked at the idea. Draco rather preferred to keep matters to himself. He had never wished to confide in any of his prior Mistresses— then again, Hermione was anything *but* his Mistress. She was *his*. Completely and entirely, wholly his. He felt a brief flutter of pride within his chest. Draco had wed one of the most elusive hidden gems within all of London. A brilliant, sharp tongue witch who could make most men cower. He could never claim to have tamed her, because that was not what he wished to do.

No, rather Draco had wanted to hoist her up and give her every opportunity she did not have to succeed in her life.

It was more than he could say for himself.

He crept along the rows of books to the cozy fireplace. He could tell that Hermione was here before he even laid eyes on her; she had a chaotic organization. Books sat neatly stacked upon the floor and table beside her, likely to be read or having been discarded as not holding her attention. And there she was, reclined in a settee she had moved to the library for her use. Her slippers had been left on the ground and her knees were brought up, the perfect table for her book. A tray of fresh fruit sat beside her on an elegantly carved side table, and as he watched she reached over and plucked a single grape from the table and slid it between her lips.

“Do you plan to just leer in the shadows or will you eventually announce yourself, Your Grace?” Hermione said without looking up from the pages she pretended to find so enthralling.

He felt a smile toying on his lips, leaning against the bookcase. “I was rather enjoying having the ability to watch my wife.”

She made a noncommittal sound as she turned the page slowly, yet her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink. Did this feel like a dream to her sometimes, as it did for him? He had never intended to marry, and yet here he was.... he turned the ring on his finger.

A moment of silence passed.

“What is it you need?” She asked quietly.

“Just a moment,” Draco replied softly. “Let me just memorize you like this.”

That shade of pink grew darker but she obliged him. He looked at her, admired her. The way the light played across her skin, the delightful dance of freckles across her nose. Curls that shone of auburn in the sunlight, bouncing free along the curve of her neck. Her simple, yet elegant, day gown. He wondered if they should retire again to the countryside, so she may read beneath the willows and enjoy the kiss of the sun upon her skin.

“Why is it you do not use magic, Draco?” Hermione asked, finally looking up and away from the book in her lap.

He knew the question would come up eventually, it was an easy observation that many had made. He had hoped it would not matter but foolish of him to wish for that; Hermione hardly left any stones unturned.

Draco let out a sigh as he pushed away from the bookcase to move towards her, gathering his thoughts. He had never voiced them before. He motioned towards the empty space at the foot of the settee and she shifted her feet out of the way. He sat down carefully, folding his hands in his lap.

“It happened many years ago. The accident.”

“The accident?” She closed her book and sat up to give him her full attention.

“Yes. A couple of us had stolen away to the park to practice dueling. We had found this old spell book in my mother’s study, with new spells etched into pages. We were curious, wanting to know what they did. The first few times, the spells were harmless. But as we worked our way through the book... I had a younger brother, did you know that?” Draco’s voice was strained. His chest seized at the thought, the memory of his brother. Hermione remained silent but shook her head slowly. “Abraxas. No one remembers him, of course. He was so young, perhaps six. He followed us everywhere. That day was no different. He had followed us out to the park. We were tossing these hexes about, cutting down plants and whatever it is silly boys do... and Abraxas—” Draco took a deep breath as he closed his eyes; that day played vividly in his mind, as if it had just happened. “He stepped in front of my wand. The *sectumsempra* cut into him at close range. None of us knew the reversal. He... our parents did not get to us in time and he died in my arms.”

Hermione was silent as she stared at him. Her eyes were wide; of course, he could not fault her. This would have occurred before her entry into the wizarding world at eleven. It had caused a stir amongst genteel society, but it had also been quickly swept under the rug. The magic they had stumbled upon at that young age had been dark magic, the spells themselves creations of another wizard and close family friend.

Not only had the death haunted him, but Draco and his entire family had come under extreme scrutiny. It had been their status and wealth alone that had saved them.

But that had not been enough to atone for his crime. Draco had removed himself from the public eye and put away his wand. He had studied abroad and away from prying eyes. When

he had returned, it had only been at the death of his father and his sense of obligation to claim his rightful place as the next Duke of Wiltshire.

Hermione let him sit silent for a moment, processing his words. When she spoke, her words were soft, her tone gentle. “And does this in part have to do with why you refuse to ask for help with your fathers embezzlement? Because it will bring further shame onto the family and perhaps new light to your brother?”

“I don’t think our family, my mother no less, can handle another scandal,” he replied quietly.

She set the book down on the table and scooted closer to him. Her hand reached for his; it felt small against his palm, but her grip was warm and sure. She did not offer any words of sorrow or wisdom, and he appreciated that. He had only ever heard that his entire life. A soft sigh left her lips and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I understand, Draco,” Hermione said softly.

~*~

“I’ll see myself out, Malfoy,” Theo called over his shoulder as he left the study. He was walking down the hall towards the foyer when he heard it.

Psssttt.

At first he thought he might have imagined it, but the sound repeated itself and before he could stop it, a small hand snared his forearm and he was yanked hard into a room.

“Bloody hell,” Theo swore as he swatted Hermione’s hand from his sleeve. “Your Grace.”

Her arms crossed impatiently and he swore he could hear the *tip tap* of a satin shoe on the ground. “Did you bring the book?”

Theo sighed loudly, glancing towards the hallway before he reached into the inside pocket of his robes. He withdrew the book and held it out to her. “I did.” She reached for it and he pulled it away, just out of reach, “but I ask your discretion on this. Draco has stated on more than one occasion that he does not wish to have children. if I find out that you coerced or manipulated him—“

Hermione let out an annoyed sigh. “I have no wish to have children, either, Theodore. This is something we, the Duke and I, need. I promise I will not entrap Draco into having children.”

He looked at her for a long, hard moment. Her expression was open and honest, and everything he knew of her was just that; she was not one to scheme or manipulate another and she was bluntly honest. He slowly held the book out to her again, dipping his head in acknowledgement.

“I wish you the best, My lady,” Theo said softly before he exited the room and townhome entirely.

~*~

Narcissa stuck the needle and thread through the woven cotton of her embroidery hoop, the ball of thread hovering just beside her and unwinding itself slowly. Her private study was quiet, the only sound was the gentle breeze that trickled through the open window. The curtains fluttered in the breeze.

“Do you think they are in love?” Abraxas’ portrait asked as the young boy watched his mother. His voice was soft and whimsical; unlike his older brother, his hair was black as night and eyes dark.

She started a new row of her embroidery, the little flower starting to look more like it should rather than a blob of color. “I do think they are, Abraxas. Have you been spying on them?”

The boy looked away guiltily. “I try not to, Mama.”

“Do you try in earnest or are you just saying so?” Narcissa looked up at the portrait with raised brows.

He dug his toe into the ground of the portrait he occupied. “I cannot help it. But I make sure I am not spotted.”

“You are far too young to worry about such frivolities,” Narcissa scolded. “Have you made any progress in your studies?”

The portrait shook his head and Narcissa rolled her eyes, stabbing the needle into the fabric.

Abraxas waited a moment before speaking, “However, I did find out about that new leaf on the family tree for you.”

That caught his mothers attention and she set the hoop in her lap as she looked up at the portrait with interest. “Indeed?”

The boy nodded his head eagerly. “Yes. According to some of the older family members, sometimes the tapestry preemptively grows a new leaf when there is a child in the future. It will remain plain until said time.”

Narcissa set aside the hoop, waving a dismissive hand to the ball of thread; it dropped into the pile in a basket. She was silent in her thoughts, considering things. From her knowledge, neither wished to have children anytime soon and Narcissa could understand that. She had suffered the loss of a child herself and knew it was an unspoken fear many held. But she also knew there was a curious, adventurous side to the young couple. One with a thirst for knowledge and exploration.

“Thank you, child,” she said softly as she gracefully rose to her feet. The news gave her hope that one day she may hold a grand babe in her arms. “Do remember to keep out of sight until your brother gives permission, yes?”

“Of course, Mama,” the portrait replied softly, before seeming to melt into the frame itself and disappear from view.

Games of Mice and Men

Chapter Notes

I apologize for my lack of updates, I had not realized that much time has passed. Here I thought I had covid, but turns out I was pregnant? Whoops. Anyway, between morning sickness and working six days a week, I've been exhausted (mentally and physically). As I enter my second trimester, I am beginning to feel like my old self!

That being said... We are in the home stretch! I am looking at roughly two-three more chapters, plus maybe an epilogue. Stay tuned.

~*~

My Fondest Readers,

Even with the Season drawing to a close,

it seems there are still balls and soirées aplenty.

I expect to see a few more engagements and perhaps we may solve some riddles.

Who else has unanswered questions?

Speaking of questions...

The Duke was spied with the Viscount,

Just like old times.

Trouble in paradise for the newlyweds?

I should hope not.

But time will tell,

Just as I do.

Yours,

The Lady Quibbler

~*~

A weight felt as if it had been lifted from Draco's shoulders at his confession; only the family's closest friends truly knew what had happened to his brother. And the truth had been clawing at him, like thorns from a rose bush for years. He had felt no judgment nor pity from Hermione when he had finally spoken about the incident, and for that he was grateful. Draco was unsure how he would have felt if she had shown either of those.

The fact that she had never held her own recent accident against him was a testament to her own character. She lived in the now and looked to the future, yet Draco was haunted by the ghosts of his past. He felt them everyday, holding him back, making him doubt himself. Hermione just moved forward in life, and did not seem to look back or regret things, rather growing and learning from them.

Whereas Draco felt he used the past as a shield; to protect himself and others.

But perhaps he ought to do as she did, and let go.

"Abraxas?" Draco stood in his mother's study, looking up at the empty frame. From the side materialized the boy in question, his painting the same as the day he had died. Youthful, full of life. A glimmer of hope for the future within his eyes. Draco felt a pang of guilt but continued on, "you no longer need to hide. I told Hermione everything."

The boy's eyes lit up, "I can finally meet your Duchess?"

Draco hesitated but nodded. "Indeed."

"Oh!" The boy clapped his hands in excitement, "most excellent! Mother has told me so much of this witch. She sounds a delight."

"You'll like her," Draco said quietly. But of course Abraxas would; it seemed everyone did despite her reservations.

~*~

It was not abnormal for them to go to bed at separate times, or even in separate rooms. Indeed, Hermione did have her own chambers as a Duchess and she frequently enjoyed the solitude. Draco had gone to bed alone, leaving his wife to read in one of the studies. She had

been content and immersed within the novel in her hands, and he had not wished to interrupt the tranquility.

He woke from his sleep as he felt cool air brushing bare skin, the blankets swept down and away from his nude body. Eyes heavy with sleep and dreams still fogging his mind, he looked down to spy Hermione kneeling beside him on the bed, delicate fingers tracing the contours of his hips. His member stirred at the touch, shy yet inquisitive.

Hermione, while bold, had never ventured to explore his body in such a manner before.

Draco held his breath as he watched her beneath half closed lids; her hair tumbling freely over her shoulders in generous waves. She was swathed in a white gossamer shift and nothing more. The moonlight filtered through the fabric to give him a tantalizing view of her body hidden beneath it.

With an increasingly bolder touch, her fingers crept closer to his hardening shaft, wrapping around the base to hold him upright. It was as if she were weighing him within her palm, exploring what was *hers*.

Hermione's lips parted as she watched her own hand, stroking him. Draco grew harder at each stroke, mesmerized by her curiosity. It was nearly his undoing when she bent at the waist, her hair spilling like a curtain around her face, and took him in her mouth.

The heat of her lips around the head of his throbbing member nearly tore a groan from his lips. Her tongue flicked and tasted him, sending a flutter of butterflies through him.

At his sharp intake of breath, her eyes lifted to his even though her lips remained.

There was no pretending he was asleep now. Her fingers had curled into the blanket beside him in an effort to hold himself still. He had no idea she would have done this without him asking- *directing*- her to do it. So innocent she was. Or so he thought. somewhere in the back of his mind, Draco remembered it had been his doing to give her a book that depicted this very act.

All thoughts, all reason, fled his mind as she sank her mouth further down onto him, her hair teasing his skin with each slow bob of her head.

And Hermione kept her eyes on his as she tasted him, her tongue exploring, prodding. Gentle yet insistent. Draco was holding her breath, holding back his groans at the sight of her bent over him. He wanted to bury his hands within her curls, to guide her and fill her wet little mouth with his entirety. But he held himself back, trying to content himself with watching her explore him.

She kept teasing him, bringing him so close to his climax he thought he might shatter, his muscles taunt with the strain to hold himself still for her— and then she pulled away. Cold air rushed in to replace her warm wet mouth, instantly cooling him from his release. He was panting at the disappointment.

“Hermione—“ he groaned, his voice pitiful to his own ears as he lifted his hips desperately, his cock still against her palm.

Without a word, she straddled his waist, the gossamer gown pulled up to her lower abdomen. Against the white fabric, lit by the moon, he watched as she guided herself down onto him. Draco could no longer hold back his moan; the sound echoing through the silent chamber as his head pressed back into the pillow. Her heat swallowed him, slick and ready for his entire length. Hermione sank down further, her hands coming to rest on his navel. The initial rush of pleasure faded and Draco was able to return his attention to his wife. His gaze devoured her, at the way her head fell back to expose the delicate arch of her neck. How her gown, such a thin layer of silken fabric, couldn't hide her breasts from his hungry gaze. Her dark rose nipples strained and plucked against the shift, begging for a kiss. Draco's attention traveled along her torso to where they were joined. She looked perfect with him buried inside her warmth, her lips stretched around his shaft. She rose up onto her knees, leaving his length glistening.

An illicit moan left his lips at the sight of her want, a shudder tearing through his entire being at the feel of her as she pressed back down.

His hands rose to her hips, fingers pressing into her, guiding her. Hermione let him, following his lead until she no longer needed it and she rode him at her own pace. Her lips were parted, her brow sweaty. Sweet little sounds fell from those lips.

The sight of her like this would be burned forever in Draco's mind.

His sweet, stubborn little wife coming undone for him.

Each stroke along his length, each sight, the way her walls fluttered around him, sent waves of pleasure through him. And when she added the pressure of grinding herself down onto him, Draco struggled to hold himself back. His hands tightened on her waist as he now lifted his hips, meeting her with each movement, matching her pace. Her breasts swayed, tantalizing and teasing. The sound of their bodies joining together filled the chamber, echoing their moans of pleasure.

He felt his climax rushing towards him like a thunderous storm, his body trembling with need. She was close as well, he could feel it. He wanted to hold himself back for her but the temptation to finish was too much.

Draco tried to pull her from him, to give himself but a moment to recover, but her hands suddenly bore down onto his shoulders. She pressed her weight onto him, and although a slight she was— it was his undoing. His hips shuddered as he came hard and deep within her, painting her womb with weeks of built up denial.

Hermione held herself firmly on him, her walls fluttering around his shaft as if to take everything he gave her. Pleasure tore through him, his eyes rolling back at how powerful his climax was. He felt breathless and overwhelmed.

And as the high of his release slowly began to fall, a gnawing anger formed in the pit of his stomach that replaced the euphoria that had once been there.

A growing sense of betrayal at what had just occurred.

She had just rolled off him, her skin glistening with sweat, when Draco kicked the blankets free of his feet and stood up. With a yank, he jerked the sheet off the bed and wrapped it around his waist, glowering.

“Draco—“ Hermione had rolled onto her elbow, reaching for him, her brows furrowed.

He stepped out of her reach. “How could you?”

“What?” She sat up, curls spilling over her shoulders.

“I *told* you I did not wish to... *finish* inside you,” he growled in frustration.

Hermione pointed to the bedside table, where a small empty potions vial sat, the cork discarded beside it. “I had a potion to prevent pregnancy, Draco. Freshly made to order and delivered just this afternoon.”

He was silent for a moment, but that irritation continued to fester. He knew immediately where she had gotten the idea from; that damned book. “That is beside the point, Hermione. I explicitly told you I *do not* want to risk it. Those potions are no guarantee.”

“They are almost entirely effective,” she retorted. “If someone does not follow the directions and proper steps, then yes, accidents happen. But I wanted—“

“Again, that does not matter!”

She spoke over him, sliding to the edge of the bed. There was a desperation in her eyes that almost broke down his resolve. “But I wanted, no I *needed* , to be with you entirely. Completely. I did not feel like we were truly one—“

She was reaching for him again but Draco shook her off. “You should have *asked* , Hermione.”

Before she could say anything else that might soothe his ire, he left her.

~*~

Draco was nowhere to be found in their townhome. In fact, when she asked upon his whereabouts the following morning, it seemed he had left via floo to the Nott residence. Leaving her alone with questions and an uncomfortable churning stomach. She did not like the fact he had stormed off without explaining why he had felt she had done him wrong.

Hermione was half tempted to follow him and demand he sit down and truly explain how he felt and let her *explain* her actions, but decided against it. She would not chase after him. She was not in the wrong.

Was she?

She had merely followed the very explicit book, nay the *guide* he himself had provided her with.

How did he think she would use the knowledge within those pages? He was not naive, he should have realized that she would exploit every thing she could. She had, afterall, been curious to the various acts between a man and a woman. It made no difference to her that they were now wed. If anything, it had given her more incentive to study that damned book.

If she were of weaker mind or opinion, she might have immediately apologized for her slight but alas, Hermione was neither of those things.

A knock sounded at the door and a footman carrying a silver platter entered. Upon it sat an envelope with the unbroken Parkinson seal. She recognized it for what it was; another invitation to some formal event. It seemed that was the most common correspondence she received now. She may not have been *good* enough when she had merely been a wallflower, but now that she was Duchess.... Well, everyone wanted a moment of her time.

But while she was tempted to discard the invite, she knew they were close friends with the Malfoys. Pansy, in particular, was friends with her husband. She broke the seal, glancing over the invite for the time and date before closing it once more. It was likely that Theo would receive a similar invite himself, and if Draco were there...

It seemed she would be going to the masquerade ball alone, but she did not expect to leave that way.

~*~

The Parkinson townhome was as extravagant and beautiful as Hermione remembered it to be at the beginning of the season. As usual, no expenses were spared. The theme this time was embracing Ancient Greek mythology. They had been encouraged to dress in disguise, to obscure their features with elaborate masks.

The main foyer was decadent, with rich bowls of fruit on pedestals and various plants draped over banisters and doorways. Candles bobbed overhead, casting a luminous soft light over the crowd. People milled about, mingling and drinking. Hidden behind their masks, the air was relaxed and giddy.

Adjusting her golden mask, she pressed into the crush in search of one of her friends. They had exchanged notes of their costumes to find one another easier. Her long white gown trailed behind her, the silken fabric draped over her to mimic the ancient beauty of days long since passed. Flowers had been woven into her curls, which hung freely down her back. A Golden armor breastplate, decorative in nature, covered her chest and plates hugged her

shoulders. A belt looped around her waist, from which a prop sword hung and in her other hand, a book.

Most of the attendees were obvious in their disguises, but many found that to be the point. It was easy to spot Harry amongst the crowd, as well as others. But many had taken their disguise seriously, trying to make it difficult to figure out who was behind the mask.

People gossiped and danced, indulging on fine wine and food. Hermione took her time meandering through the throng. While she had expectations to be present as a Duchess, that pressure was relieved slightly. Masked, she was once again a wallflower. And while people glanced at her or perhaps guessed at her identity, no one approached her.

It was a breath of fresh air.

The atmosphere was relaxed, but Hermione knew that this was a matchmaking event just as all the events were. She felt fortunate that she no longer felt that unwanted pressure.

Her eyes roved over masks, unknowingly trying to find the only person she truly wished to see. Her husband was here, she knew. Theo had sent an owl hours ago, which had informed her of Draco's intent to attend. She had not dared return with an inquiry of Draco's disguise, lest he become wary. Music struck up and many of the guests paired off and moved to the center of the ball room to dance. Skirts swirled, feathers danced, a rainbow of colors moved as one.

She spotted Ginny amongst the dancers, her brilliant fiery hair a beacon even with her mask. She was dancing with who she assumed to be Theo. Perhaps intentionally or not, their costumes echoed one another.

If Theo was dancing and occupied, it most likely meant that Draco was sulking along the perimeter with one of the other lords.

Hermione made her way along the edge of the room, side stepping around giggling women and bickering men.

There . Beside one of the windows she spied a tall blond wizard draped in simple linens of earthly tones. His mask was silver, and piercing grey eyes met hers as she approached. His companion beside him stirred, and Hermione greeted the Earl named Blaise. His white robes were brilliant against his dark skin, his mask of gold trimmed with brilliant feathers of many colors. A goblet was grasped in his hand was overflowing with grapes.

"My Lord," she dipped her head in greeting.

"Your Grace," Blaise responded.

"Dionysus?" She inquired.

He flashed her a brilliant smile. "Indeed." He paused a moment, glancing at Draco who had yet to greet her. Blaise looked elsewhere, lifting his goblet to no one in particular. "Ahh, I see

an Aphrodite who appears lovely. If you'll excuse me, Your Graces." And with a quick dip of his head, the young lord was gone.

Hermione waited a moment, waiting for her husband to say something — anything— yet he did not. His jaw briefly clenched as he spared her a glance but nothing more.

"So, who is it you're supposed to be?" Hermione ventured, trying to break the silence.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Am I to guess, then?"

He shrugged, his gaze raking along her from head to toe. Even in his ire, it sent a shiver through her.

"You're Athena," he stated without question. She opened her mouth to question his guess, but he pointed at the book she held. "Of course you would settle on the most brilliant goddess of the time. It's rather obvious, if you ask me."

Music struck up for another waltz and Hermione motioned towards the floor, "should we...?"

"No." His lips were set in a grim line.

Hermione folded her arms, tapping her toe in annoyance at his continued stubbornness. "You are utterly impossible."

She knew he was not about to give in, and with his mask offering some anonymity, he was free to rebuff her with little repercussions. In any other setting their behavior may have raised brows, but no one seemed to even look their way.

At his continued silence, she let out an annoyed huff. "Very well."

She tossed her curls over her shoulder and turned on her heel, leaving the brooding wizard alone as she swept from the room to find a familiar sanctuary.

Confessions

“Your wife has been gone for some time,” Blaise pointed out as the night wore on. Around them people continued to dance and be merry; the room was filled with boisterous voices and good cheer.

“Should I be concerned you’re taking notice of my wife’s comings and goings, Blaise?” Draco drawled before he down his glass of wine.

Blaise lifted his shoulders in a nonchalant gesture, gesturing towards the dance floor. “I’ve also taken note that Theodore has been absent as well so you may do with that what you will.”

Draco had, he admitted to himself, noticed that as well. And it was not due to the fact he thought ill of his friend or Hermione; rather, he *knew* where Hermione had disappeared to and whom Theo was with. And it was not with one another. If there was ever a loyal witch, it was his wife. No matter their disagreement, he knew he did not have to worry about her whereabouts or conduct in such a manner.

And even though he was rather irritated at Hermione, he felt a pang of annoyance at himself for letting her actions fluster him in such a way. After he had stormed out of the room, his anger had settled and he had been able to process what had occurred. To mull over the words she had said. She had done nothing to coerce him or used him in any malicious way. She had done so in a way to connect with him even further; the most intimate way possible, in fact. If anything, it showed her absolute trust in him.

And yet Draco had let his pride get in the way of accepting her gesture and apologizing for his own outburst and anger.

Even if she were in the wrong as well.

He knew where she had most likely gone to sulk; she was predictable to some extent. Unlike some women, she was not one to hop in the carriage and leave in a fit of anger. No, she was the sort to find a quiet place and calm her mind.

The library.

Draco set his empty glass down on one of the serving trays as a sommelier walked by, unironically — or perhaps not — dressed as house elves, before he excused himself from Blaise’s company. He strode past an alcove where he glimpsed Pansy in the embrace of Harry, his glasses pushed up the bridge of his nose as their lips melted together.

It seemed everyone was making up for lost time, he mused.

He did not let his thoughts linger on that couple long, knowing they were a fickle couple on the best of days and he was not one to gossip about their behavior. Mainly because he apparently had to worry about his own.

Grateful for his disguise— albeit a poor one— he managed to slip away unnoticed. The hallway was filled with casual interlopers and lovers, meandering about the townhome. As he approached the library doors, the irony that this was where he had first spied Hermione was not lost on him. Nor the fact that he now approached her as her husband. Funny how things could change so swiftly and unpredictably. How adamant both of them had been in their lives, stubborn and so against marriage, that they now were bonded to one another.

Perhaps it had been fate that they had crossed paths that day.

Destiny, even.

He normally loathed the idea of such a thing, given his past history but... this time was different.

As he opened the door to slip inside, he spotted her.

Hermione, the wallflower that no one had bothered to notice, was seated in a settee near the fireplace. A candle bobbed lazily over her head, illuminating her in an almost ethereal glow. She held a book poised in her hand, her wand shoved haphazardly into her hair. Her mask had been discarded on the floor just at her feet. A smile touched his lips at the sight of her.

How many wizards had overlooked her?

How had *he* almost failed to notice her?

Draco realized he was grateful for stumbling into her, for daring to push her buttons. For finding himself in a compromising position with her because... he did not think he could have kept her just as his mistress. He realized that he would have wanted, no *needed*, more. He never wanted to risk losing her. When she had become injured, it had felt like his world had ground to a halt and his chest had hurt. His heart had ached at the thought of losing her, and the only time it had felt like that before was when his brother had passed.

Because he had loved his brother.

But the question remained: did he love Hermione?

He shut the door silently behind him as he stepped into the room, pondering the quarry posed from his heart. The organ itself fluttered away at the prospect of the answer he knew to be true.

When had he fallen for her? *How?*

As she still remained nestled into the chair, Draco crept closer, lost in thought and simply admiring the witch that was his.

Did it matter when?

She noticed his movement and her eyes left the book to look at him. She said nothing, waiting quietly. She still held her book open as if she might decide to ignore him and return to where she had left off.

He was aware that she could very well hex him and that his wand still sat at their home. And perhaps he might deserve it, so he approached with caution; there was a fire that danced in her eyes that mimicked the candle beside her.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said, but he corrected himself at her skeptical lift of a brow. “Okay, maybe not *looking*, per say. I knew I could find you here.”

Still no response from her and he chanced moving closer, keeping rapt attention on her hands. As long as she did not reach for her wand, he should be safe.

“I’ve come to... talk.” Draco tried. Her brows still lifted while that fire danced wickedly. “Apologize?”

“I might believe you if you were on your knees.” Hermione finally said, closing the book slowly and setting it on her lap. “Groveling, perhaps?”

“Is that what I must do to apologize? To win back your affection?” He asked, prowling cautiously closer. He could guess that Hermione was the kind of witch that would and could *easily* hold a grudge, and that even if she adamantly denied it, she would appreciate seeing him fold before her.

Her eyes were like whiskey in the candlelight as she held his gaze, lifting her chin to a stubborn angle.

Draco realized he would be willing to set aside his own hurt ego to soothe hers, something he rarely, if ever, did. He felt his body groan in protest as he slowly sank down onto his knees before her, his hands coming to rest on her bent legs. He looked up at her, framed in candlelight, as he forced aside his own displeasure and unhappiness. His thumbs traced the shape of her knee through her gown. There was a spark of surprise mingled with victory within her eyes.

“Hermione, I am terrible at apologies,” he began slowly, looking down at the book in her lap while he tried to find the right words. “And even though I do not feel like I am necessarily in the wrong for feeling as I do, I... I am trying to understand your frustration with me and our situation. I can see how I hurt you.”

While he may be willing to apologize, he knew he could not simply ignore his own feelings over the situation. They would have to come to a mutual understanding on what had happened and move forward together. He did not expect her apology, but he did expect her to understand.

With her continued silence, Draco forged ahead. He felt unsure in this area of admitting to wrongdoing and overreaction on his part; he could count on one hand how often he *did* apologize. Which was rare, if ever. He was a *Duke*, afterall. He did not have to apologize.

“I’m sorry I could not tell you why I... why I did not wish to do *that* with you. I should have explained the situation sooner, or better. And even I do not fully understand my hesitancy to... *Try* the method you provided. Because I realize that you did not do it with malicious intent, or in a way to manipulate me. You just—“

“I want to be yours. Entirely.” Hermione interrupted softly. “Before you were holding back. I felt as if you were withholding a final piece of yourself from me, that you... did not want me.”

There was the softer crack to her voice as she spoke, and her eyes had slipped away from his to look down at her hands. They had tightened on the book in her lap.

“I never meant to make you feel that way, Hermione,” Draco whispered. “I know we, our marriage, is not ideal or what we wanted but I...” it was his turn to hesitate, squeezing her knees gently. “I adore you— nay, I’ve come to love you. And opening myself up to someone is terrifying.”

For a moment, she did not move or respond. She may have even been holding her breath. But the silence drew on, the only sound the crackle of the fireplace.

“Hermione, please say something—“

“You love me?” She asked suddenly, reverently.

Draco frowned a little at her confusion. “Well, obviously.”

“*Obviously?* What do you mean by that? I’m not sure how obvious it is for someone to love another without stating it.”

“Well, I mean I thought it was fairly obvious... I did not realize I would have to say the words themselves—“

“You are a tottering fool, Draco Malfoy,” Hermione scolded him, “of course it is not obvious. One should always say their feelings to their spouse.” Her hands had left the book they had been clutching to cover his. Her expression had softened, the hardness in her eyes disappearing and replaced with a warmth that rivaled the fire at their side. “I do believe, dare I say, that I love you too?”

There was something deep within him that sparked at the words. A leap of excitement at her soft spoken confession, as if she were too scared to admit her own feelings even after his own confession. Perhaps it was due to the fact that both of them were out of their element and bloody stubborn when it came to matters of the heart. Or perhaps it was because they were both so new to this; their marriage, their positions.

But his heart fluttered in an anxious, happy trepidation.

She had shifted to the edge of her seat, her hands lifting to his face. Draco looked up at her, at the stubborn wallflower that he had found amongst the weeds, and he questioned how lucky he truly was. He doubted any witch could replace her; she alone matched him in wit and spirit.

Hermione nimbly untied the back of his mask, tugging the strings free and letting it fall away. And then her lips met his, the softest of grazes that sent a shiver through his body. He knew

that they would have to talk this through more, to figure out how to fix what had transpired between them— but it could wait until tomorrow.

The kiss deepened, her fingers sliding into his hair and teasing the back of his scalp with her nails. A shudder ran down his spine. Draco's hands slid from her knees and along her thighs, his thumb pressing inwards at the apex of her thighs for the briefest of moments before they rose to grip her waist. One tug and she slipped off the chair and straddled his knees, her skirts tangled and bunched between them.

His arms slipped around her waist, pulling her tight to his chest, fingertips tracing along the curve of her spine. Just as always, a fire ignited between them.

Draco felt his desire for her rising, heat pooling in the pits of his stomach. He wanted her, here and now. He didn't think he could wait until they got home to claim her and reaffirm their love for one another.

But some sense of decorum forced him to break from the kiss, "what if someone walks in?"

Her brows lifted with amusement, her cheeks flushed with heat. "Who else, pray tell, besides us, enjoys slipping off to the library?"

"Point made," he growled against her lips as he reclaimed them.

Hermione's hand had slipped down between them to find the front of his trousers, fingers making quick work of the buttons. She found him there, hard and eager. Her hand wrapped around his shaft, guiding him to her entrance. Draco groaned at the realization that she had worn nothing beneath her gown. The head of his throbbing length slipped through her folds, finding her wet and eager for him. Adjusting her weight to rest her knees on the ground, she sat astride him and slowly sank down onto his length.

With his arms wrapped around her tightly, she rose and fell slowly, following a pattern as old as time. Pleasure coursed through his body each time she sank down onto him and her heat enveloped his entire length. Her fingers slipped into his hair as she kissed him deeply, their moans broken by desperate pants.

The pace picked up, becoming more intense as her breathing became more erratic and her moans throaty. She rode him with the ease of any equestrian, her thighs gripping and releasing him with a steady movement. Her walls clenched around him in growing waves as she pushed them towards their climax. Soon, their peak was upon them and they threw themselves into the pleasure of it together, their bodies intertwined and shuddering as the waves embraced them.

And With That—

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

My lovely readers:

The Season is drawing to a close. Much sorrows.

Many matches have been made,

Dare I say that some are more exciting than others.

*As many nobles retire to their
country homes, it seems like London is
Preparing for a sleepy fall and winter.*

*I may too retire,
But I have eyes and ears everywhere.*

Yours, the ever watchful,

The Lady Quibbler

~*~

Their reunion had settled the tension between them with surprising ease, but Hermione knew there were still discussions to be had. Eventually, of course. For the time being, she basked in the warmth of the love that Draco had confessed.

He loved her.

Loved her .

And she loved him.

Even now, she felt giddy at the idea of it. At the feeling the simple words brought to her. Her chest felt full, butterflies dancing through her stomach. It was a mutual emotion they shared

as well. Not unrequited, but shared.

She found herself smiling down the table at Draco, her chin propped in her hand as she indulged herself with looking at him. Admiring him.

Hermione felt... overcome with affection for the Duke, elation that he was *hers*. Somehow, their dislike for one another had grown and changed. Perhaps, even in the beginning, they had an odd affection for one another. Their bickering and exchanges had grown into witty banter. And opportunities allowed new, stronger emotions to take root and blossom.

Of course she knew they would have to sit down and have a real discussion of what had transpired between them. She agreed that she did not necessarily want children, but that could change. The idea no longer disagreed with her quite as much; she could almost picture curly haired blond children running about their home, keeping Draco on the edge of his toes and Narcissa showering them with far too many gifts.

It was almost an appealing thought.

But one for the farther off future.

Draco finally noticed her shameless staring and lifted his brows as he sipped from his cup. "Hmm? You look like you have a lot on your mind."

Her lips curved into an easy smile. "Indeed, I do. But nothing to be concerned about."

"That in itself is concerning," Draco replied as he set the cup down. "My wife, *not* scheming and planning my demise? I should fetch the mediwitch and check your temperature. Or better yet, perhaps I should check for myself."

Her pulse leapt at the idea of just how he could check her temperature, and she felt herself growing warm at the very idea of it.

"Shh, the servants—" Hermione tried to scold him, but he looked pointedly around the room. It was empty, save for the two of them.

"They'll what, hear me bending you over the table?" Draco smirked.

Her face grew hot. " *Draco*— "

"You're right, they'll hear *you* when you come on my—"

With a flick of her wand, his words were silenced, but his lips continued to move and she very clearly knew what he was talking about doing to her. What he was describing. More than once he had taken her on this very table, but only one time did the servants come to investigate. Upon the sound of dishes crashing to the floor, no less. And they had immediately retreated. Since then, the servants wisely stayed away unless summoned.

An annoyed look crossed his face and he motioned to himself, silently asking her to remove the charm. She smiled sweetly at him.

“Do. It. Yourself.”

He scowled.

A new tactic Hermione had also taken upon herself after meeting Abraxas was finding little, harmless ways to encourage Draco to use magic. Things that were almost second nature and would only do good in a situation. Sometimes it was requesting a candle to be lit while she read, or pretending her hands were chilly and needed to be warmed. Other times such as this where she liked to just annoy him enough where he would impulsively use magic. Silencing him was her favorite, because he could rarely keep his mouth shut.

They had finally reached the point where he now carried his own wand, rather than borrowing hers.

The progress was slow but yet it was a small victory.

And Hermione was proud that Draco was slowly overcoming his fear and refusal to do magic.

On cue, Draco plucked his wand from his breast pocket and removed her silencing charm. He pointed the wand at her in warning. “One of these days, I’ll get you back. But it won’t be magic that silences you, my little pet, but my cock—”

A knock at the dining room door signaled a guest and his inappropriate threat— intriguing as it was— was cut short. He returned his wand to his pocket as he sat back in his chair as if it were a throne.

“We’ll finish this later, my Duchess,” Draco said to her before he looked at the door, donning the mask of the Duke in a heartbeat. “Enter.”

The door was opened by a servant and Narcissa swept into the room. She had donned a traveling suit and robes. As summer was drawing to a close, the air had grown crisp, so many members of the town added layers to their elaborate outfits. The Dowager Duchess smiled warmly as she breezed into the space with a grace that Hermione doubted she would ever master.

“Hello, my dears.” She greeted them warmly, waving a dismissive hand towards them as they both rose to meet her. “No need to bother. I just wished to come in and say my farewells.”

“You’re leaving, Mother?” Draco asked with a slight frown.

“Indeed. The Season is over and since you are wed, I no longer am needed hovering about and playing matchmaker. Or cleaning up your messes. The renovations on my country estate are nearly finished and I feel it best to go see the progress.” She explained lightly. She seemed to float over to her son, leaning over to press a kiss to his cheek. “Plus, I feel like you two will no longer murder one another and my interference is not required.”

Hermione snorted behind her hand, which earned her a warning look from her husband.

“I’ll have you know Mother, that we have been getting on famously,” Draco quipped.

“So we have all heard,” Narcissa replied with a smirk. Hermione’s face felt hot and Draco’s ears turned pink. “Perhaps there will be a grandchild in the near future?”

Neither of them would dissuade the Dowager from her dreams of them having heirs. The witch did not seem to notice their lack of response or shared glance, instead coming around the table to also press a chaste kiss to Hermione’s cheek.

“Don’t hesitate to owl me if the lad misbehaves or causes you distress. He may be my son, but you are now my daughter and I will gladly chastise or hex his stockings right off.”

“ *Mother* , don’t encourage her!” Draco cried.

Narcissa flashed her son a pleasant smile that reminded Hermione all too much of Draco’s devious smirks. A warning smile. “Don’t be an arse then, Draco. You will treat Hermione like the Duchess she is.”

He grumbled before he fell silent.

“I’ll owl you regardless,” Hermione told the Dowager Duchess.

“Excellent, I look forward to it. Farewell, Your Graces.” Without another word, the witch swept from the room with a simple waggle of her fingers. In the distance, the front door could be heard opening and closing as Narcissa left the townhome.

They were left in a companionable silence after her departure. Hermione could tell that while Draco enjoyed his independence, he also was close to his mother and fond of her presence. Their marriage had changed living arrangements, and while the Dowager Duchess was more than welcome to visit, it was expected she would take up her own residence now. Of course, Hermione intended to leave her room untouched and had made it clear that Narcissa was more than welcome at any time at either of their homes.

With Narcissa taking up residence in her own home, it also meant that there would be less distractions from important conversations.

Hermione fiddled with her fork as she studied Draco from beneath her lashes. He had stated he was uncomfortable with the idea of having a child, and thus so determined to avoid the risk entirely. And she had also mentioned her desire to, at the bare minimum, wait to have children. But his absolute refusal on the matter gave her pause. He had confessed his reasoning for no longer using magic, perhaps that had something to do with it? He had never clarified why. And originally it had come up with the understanding that she was to be a *mistress* and not a wife.

One was scandalous to have children with, the other expected.

“Draco—“ Hermione cleared her throat.

Knock knock.

She barely contained the eye roll at the interruption.

The door opened to admit Harry into the room. The Marquis looked as well put together as any of the Lords in town, his suit tailored and crisp, free from debris. He smirked as he entered, setting aside his decorative cane. It seemed as if every nobleman walked with one these days. Her own husband had one, a black walnut with a silver snake handle that bore emerald eyes.

“Harry,” Hermione greeted as she rose from her chair. “What brings you to our home?”

He walked over to her and pressed a chaste kiss to her knuckles. “Hermione.” A glance at Draco, “Your Grace.”

“You can call him Draco,” Hermione offered.

“No no, I prefer he continues to grovel at my feet while using my proper title. Don’t encourage him to stop,” Draco replied cheekily. “I am his better, after all.”

Harry scowled at the other wizard and Hermione waved a dismissive hand at her husband as she turned her attention to her friend. “Ignore him—“

“I usually do,” Harry muttered.

“Arse,” Draco drawled.

Hermione did roll her eyes this time but continued, “whatever brings you by?”

“I wished to come by and see you,” he responded lightly. He lowered his voice a little, “and speak to you privately, if I could? I heard there was some... *tension* between the two of you? Is everything..?”

Draco leaned back in his chair as he sipped noisily from his glass, brows lifting towards his blond hairline. A very clear *I can hear you* expression on his aristocratic face.

“You can talk about anything in front of Draco,” she pointed out, knowing full well he would just eavesdrop regardless.

“I mean, I would rather not even talk to him in any situation where possible.” Harry replied. “I would prefer to hex his balls right off.”

“Feeling is mutual.”

Hermione rubbed her fingers against her temple. Did she have their endless bickering to look forward to? Perhaps she should invest in learning a magical charm to spritz them with water whenever they argued, much like she would a cat.

“We can go into my sitting room to keep talking,” Hermione said simply, “just so I don’t have to hear the two of you going back and forth.”

“You act as if we are children,” Draco called out after her as she swept from the room, Harry following a few paces behind after snatching his cane. They walked in silence to her sitting room, where she motioned to a chair.

He shook his head, "I'm fine standing."

"So what is it you needed to discuss?"

He looked uncomfortable as he fidgeted with the cuff link of his robes. "As I said, I've heard some concerning things between you and the Duke and just want to address them and remind you that I am here for you if you need someone to talk to. I'm aware that the Duke can be... a bit cold or cruel."

Hermione frowned at his callous words. "Draco isn't cold *or* cruel, Harry. We were — are, honestly— having minor issues it's true—"

"He hasn't hurt you, has he?"

She shook her head. "Absolutely not, and you and I both know I can defend myself if he has tried. No, this was an entirely different and *personal* matter. A mere..." she tried to find the right words, " *disagreement* , if you will."

"Uh huh."

"Be skeptical all you want, Harry. But honestly, I'm fine. I... I really do care about him," Hermione admitted quietly. She knew Harry's concern was coming from a place of good intentions, but she also knew how much gossip liked to slander reputations. "There are just a lot of adjustments happening and we are working on things. Okay?"

Harry was studying her with a shrewd, skeptical gaze. "Hmm, I'll take your word for it. Besides, I would hope you would trust me with any real issues should they arise."

Hermione placed a placating hand upon his sleeve. "Of course I would, Harry. You are one of my oldest and dearest friends." She patted her fingers. "And as such, perhaps you would do so well to tell me about how things are progressing with Miss Parkinson?"

His face flushed brightly as he huffed, suddenly shaking her hand off as he turned towards the sitting room door. "I must be off, I've lost track of time! I'm glad to have cleared the air. I have things to do, people to see—"

"Such as Pansy?" She asked sweetly.

His pace hastened as he briskly walked to the door. "Absolutely not. I've no idea what you are talking about. I'll stop by for another visit later this week? A proper one. Tea, perhaps? Brunch?"

She was silently laughing at how flustered Harry had become with each step. She waved to him as he reached the foyer, "I look forward to it!"

The door shut behind him and Hermione took a moment before turning back towards the dining room, only to find that Draco had emerged and was casually leaning against the wall as he studied her. His grey eyes were warm, sparkling with a curiosity.

"I feel we should sit down and finish that discussion we never had," Hermione said softly.

The corner of his lips lifted. “That would probably be for the best.”

“Harry was right to show his concern, especially if others had noticed something was... off between us,” Hermione pointed out.

“Perhaps.” He waited a moment before motioning towards his study. “Let us go somewhere private?”

His study was warm and welcoming, despite the rich mahogany wood that surrounded her. It helped set her nerves at ease, which had suddenly begun to dance with an anxious energy. She folded her hands together as she stood in the center of the room, waiting for him to close the door. She knew she would be unable to stop herself from fidgeting, and staying on her feet allowed her some literal wiggle room. He prowled back towards her and leaned his hip against his desk.

“So what is that big brain of yours thinking about, Granger?” He asked quietly. His hands rested on the desk at his side, and his expression was guarded— but open.

Hermione took a moment trying to decide how best to approach such a delicate topic, but decided it best to just spit it out. “I would like to hear from you the reason you were so against the idea of... finishing inside me after we are intimate. I want to hear your words, and not just something to appease me.”

To his credit, Draco remained stoic. His expression hardened slightly but his position remained the same. “Does it matter? You said you will continue to take the potion—“

“Yes. It matters to me, Draco. It’s important. It’s important enough to you that you became upset at me because of it.”

He mulled over his thoughts for a moment, his long fingers drumming briefly on the desk. “Very well, if you must know it’s a bit of a combination of reasons. And no, it’s not because of you or anything you’ve done,” he added in sharply. “It started with my brother. As you well know, his passing...” Draco cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable, “his passing gave me pause on everything I did from that moment on. Using magic was the primary one but also... I failed at being a big brother, how could I ever be a father?”

Hermione remained silent despite the fact she wanted to reach out to him. He continued, “and then when my father died in that accident and I was suddenly a Duke? All eyes were on me. I was expected to suddenly step out of my bootstraps and fill his footsteps. I had to take on *everything*. His estates, his finances— or lack thereof, in his case— and then I was supposed to wed? And with marriage comes the expectation to produce an heir. How could I bring a child into the house when I was still learning to run it?”

Valid points, Hermione had to admit. She only had privy to some of his estate matters and finances and it was a lot.

“And then I met you.” His expression softened.

Her heart did a little flip.

“You, a witch that was quite unlike the others. They wanted my name and my wealth, but you? You just wanted *me* .”

“We had discussed a monthly allowance,” she reminded him teasingly.

“That was my suggestion because one does not take a mistress without caring for their wellbeing. You, Hermione, did not ask me about the money. You wanted your freedom from the expectations of the world we live in, the very one that was suffocating me as well as you. You offered me a little slice of escape. And you were adamant about not having children *just because* you were expected to.”

She had looked down and away from him, a creeping sense of embarrassment filling her. But she felt his fingers on her chin, lifting her face to his. “You enforced my need to abstain from having any unwanted children. You craved your freedom and I wanted to live through you. *With you* . And I didn't realize... I didn't think about the fact that you only wished to be mine wholly. That you were not trying to have an heir, but just to be *mine* .”

His thumb swept across her jaw, caressing it. “And I refused to take away that freedom any more from you. We were forced to wed, but I would not keep you in that way that we both were not ready for. I would not demand you to give up the rest of your freedom for me, not for my title. I would never expect you to bear my children just because society demanded it.”

Her heart swelled within her chest at his words. She lifted her hand to touch his face. “And I would never ask you to have children, nor force you to. But when and if you're ever ready, we can talk through it and decide then, okay? Until that time, I will continue to stay on the potion to be safe and if you prefer, you don't have to... well, you know.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. We've our whole lives ahead of us. We don't have to rush to produce an heir just yet.”

Draco had drawn her closer to him, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Hmm, a whole life ahead of us? And whatever should we do during that time?”

“Whatever you wish.”

“Well, there are many things I wish to do to you, my wife,” his lips were a breath away from hers.

Hermione smirked, her voice a whisper. “Better get started then, My Lord.”

Chapter End Notes

I am wrapping up loose ends here. With one chapter to go, lets hope I have not forgotten anything!

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“London just won’t be the same without you,” Ginny complained as she threw herself down onto Hermione’s bed. She rolled onto her side and propped her head upon her palm as she watched. Her red hair spilled out across the blankets behind her. “What am I supposed to do until you come back?”

Hermione carefully sorted through some of her favorite books before setting them into the trunk in the center of the room. “The same that you always do, Gin. Terrorize your brothers, of course.”

Ginny scowled a little. “I’ve only got the twins and Ronald, the rest have all gone off to start their lives.”

Shutting the lid of the trunk with a quiet *thud*, Hermione flicked her wand to cast a weightlessness charm to make moving it an easier task.

“Don’t forget about Harry,” she reminded her friend. She hated to admit that she did worry about how he was handling her marriage. Not in the sense of him suffering any sort of jealousy, but rather the fact they all had grown up together and been such a tight knit group. Entire days spent with one another, going to the market or races, and even skating on the frozen Thames in winter.

It was certainly something Hermione would miss, even though she knew Draco would not prevent her or discourage her from continuing said friendships and activities. But rather that she was choosing to focus on her marriage, for the time being. Nestled away in Wiltshire Estate seemed like the perfect, cozy opportunity for the two of them.

And *just* the two of them.

“*Harry* has been a pest, Hermione. Going on and on about *proper* behavior and following *proper* etiquette,” Ginny whined even as Hermione felt her lips twitch; it seemed the Marquis had turned his overbearing and obnoxiously protective attention onto Ginny. “And it’s absurd. He acts all perfect, like he is some bloody chosen one when in reality, he is a scandalous rake!”

“I do recall seeing him, ahem, *embracing* some lady at the masked ball,” Hermione sat on the foot of the bed. “Dark hair, a bit petite but fierce...” she waved a hand through the air.

“Pansy! Again? Will Harry ever learn?”

Hermione shrugged. “I don’t think the witch is as innocent as she seems. In fact, I feel she may be the one playing Harry. On that note—” she turned to look at her friend. “Whatever is going on between you and the Viscount?”

“Who, Theo?” Ginny twirled a strand of hair around her finger in thought.

A smirk touched Hermione’s lips. “Oh, it’s *Theo*, is it?”

Ginny turned red as she sat up quickly. “That’s his name, Hermione.”

“I didn’t realize the two of you were on a first name basis. Does he call you Ginevra? Or Ginny? Or perhaps just Gin?”

“Asks the one who was content with being the Duke’s mistress!” Ginny sprang to her feet, the tips of her ears the same shade as her hair. “Which, I’ll remind you, I supported.”

“The Viscount seems plenty kind, from what I can tell.” Hermione replied placatingly, not wishing to ruffle her friend’s feathers. “And he is a good friend of Draco’s. If you were, I dare say, interested in him... there are plenty of opportunities for you two to be in the same vicinity due to our union.”

The redheaded witch had crossed her arms, her slippered toe tapping on the ground. “Don’t tell me that you’re suddenly going to be matchmaking just because you yourself are wed?”

She shrugged. “I did not say that at all. I was merely pointing out should you come over, there is a chance the Viscount will be there as well. Either by accident or...”

Ginny narrowed her eyes slightly. “*You*, my Duchess of Wiltshire, are up to no good.”

Hermione flashed a smile as she flicked her wand and her wardrobe doors swung open, gowns folding midair as they floated towards the next open trunk. They stacked themselves neatly into piles of various silks and patterns.

“Shall we go have some tea? I believe we are leaving shortly after lunch.” Hermione tucked her wand into her curls, and the pair left her room to head downstairs.

~*~

Days turned into weeks at the cozy Wiltshire Estate tucked away in the countryside. Autumn came, the leaves turning shades of fire before they fell. Winter weather rolled in and the land was blanketed in generous layers of snow.

The manor changed overnight; festive decorations draped along banisters and adorned mantles. Mistletoe hung from seemingly random doorways, by which Draco would steal a kiss from Hermione with every opportunity. The air was crisp, and the scent of pine and

cinnamon teased their senses. While she has grown up participating in the holiday season, it had never been done on such a grand scale.

Even the gardens were decorated; trees and bushes draped with strands of tinsel, glass orbs of varying colors and sizes hanging from icy and snow covered branches.

It was as though while everything around them slumbered, the manor buzzed with life.

“So when will your parents be arriving?” Draco asked as they walked along the terrace. Snow flurries danced around them in the winter air.

Hermione adjusted her thick robes around her, “I believe they said they will be arriving by weeks end, and will be still until the new year.”

“Tis a shame they were not comfortable using the Floo, or even having one of us apparite them.” Draco replied as he slowed. He reached for her hand. Their fingers linking together despite their somewhat bulky gloves.

“The thestrals will get them here just fine, Draco. There is nothing wrong with using a carriage for travel. You know I enjoy it just as much as they do,” Hermione said as she fell into step beside her husband.

“It’s so—“

“Are you going to say Muggle?”

He let out a laugh, his breath coming out in a fog before him. “I *was not*, I’ll have you know. I was going to say *slow* , but now that you mention it....”

She butted him with her shoulder, a false scowl on her face. “Oh, hush. Just be glad they are making the trip at all.”

He nudged her back. “I dare say I have not seen your parents since you moved from their home. How are they doing?”

Hermione shrugged a little. “They are enjoying their freedom, I suppose. They always joked it was I that kept them London-bound. They went abroad for a couple weeks and have just returned.”

“Oh? And how was that? Where did they go?”

“They traveled down to Germany and Austria. My father met with some colleagues, I believe. Their letters were brief, they still do not quite trust owls to deliver their missives successfully.” Hermione let out a little chuckle at the thought. “You’ll have to ask them more details on how their travels went and whereabouts.”

“Indeed,” Draco agreed.

They strolled for a few more minutes in silence, the gardens quiet around them. It was serene, and a far cry different from the hustle of the ton. Hermione rather preferred this place and the

solitude it offered.

“Will any of our friends be joining us for the holidays?” Draco inquired softly, his hand warm against hers.

She shrugged slightly. “I did not invite anyone. Should I? As a Duchess and all...”

Hermione was still learning the intricacies of her new station, much to the everlasting gratitude of Narcissa for owling her almost daily with thoughts and suggestions. Most of which were how to keep a polite public face while still being able to enjoy her own peace and solitude. Often, Narcissa would inform her of the proper things she *had* to do, and how to go about it in such a manner that Hermione might actually enjoy it. Hosting *anything* was ideal as a Duchess. Attending things she received invites to was also fabulous. Making public appearances also was highly suggested; all of which came with the helpful disclaimer that these *obligations* were no longer such with the winter months. And coupled with their choice to retire to the countryside, it was far more acceptable for them to turn things down.

And to her delight, Draco had no qualms about playing his part as the reclusive Duke. It was with an almost childlike glee that he tossed invites into the fireplace.

“You don’t have to invite anyone or attend anything, Hermione. As a Duchess, your presence is an honor and not a guarantee. Besides, I like to think we are on an extended honeymoon.” He tugged her hand lightly as they turned towards a set of doors. “Speaking of which, I think we should go abroad soon. There are several libraries that I believe you must absolutely see to believe.”

The warm air of the manor washed over her as they strode back inside. “Is that so?”

Draco shut the door behind her before he lightly tugged her gloves off. They fell to the floor at their feet. He nodded his head as his fingers deftly unbuttoned her robes, and the garment joined her gloves.

“Indeed. In fact, I think I have some books on them in our very own library,” a slow smirk curled onto his lips. “Maybe we should go... take a look and warm up?”

His fingers had caught her chin, the leather of his gloves chilly and causing a sinful shiver to run down her spine. Her hands settled against his chest, wiping away some melting snow flakes as she leaned up on her toes. Their lips were a breath apart.

“I’ll race you there, Draco.”

And before he could stop her, Hermione took off in a sprint. Draco felt heat rushing through his veins as he slowly took his gloves off, tossing them to the ground as he counted silently to ten... And then he took off after her, chasing the laughter that rang through the halls and would forever be burned into his heart.

The End

Chapter End Notes

I would like to say thank you, first and foremost to the alpha's and beta's who gave their time and energy into this WIP for me. I am so grateful.

Next, I want to thank those who read this as a WIP; having active readers on a project is some of the best muse-fuel.

I hope everyone enjoyed this story and are satisfied with the ending.

Please keep an eye out for the next installment, To Marry A Marquis. It will be a Harry x Pansy, with special dramione appearances and perhaps even some more Ginny x Theo. At this time, I do not have an expected release date, but the first chapter is in the works.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!