

Bloodties

by Rhea Silvia

Bellatrix Lestrange gives birth.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 14

Bellatrix Lestrange gives birth.

"My lord, allow me to be the first to congratulate you."

"It has happened, then?"

The doors open. "My lord," gasps the first of the two men who enter at a near-run, "Bella has just been delivered of a child."

"You are late with the news, Rodolphus." Lestrange lowers his eyes, Rabastan moving closer. "But no less welcome, for that." Both sets of dark eyes flick up at him. "It is a great honour for you."

"For us all, my lord." She's quieter than her brother-in-law; even he had not noticed her entry. She crosses the room, kneeling before him, head bowed, hair hiding her face.

"Your sister is well?" He forces long fingers under her chin, forcing her to look up. A face like hers tried to betray him, scant days ago, and he does not trust its lines and flawless beauty, even in his own bed.

"Yes, my lord."

"And the child?"

"She, too, is well." He lets her go, and her husband relaxes minutely. "I am pleased, Narcissa, with your devotion." She bows again, still kneeling. Lucius moves forward, hands on her shoulders, arresting her— sibling similar. He turns, half-a-glance spared for the brothers, intent on reaching his daughter's room. "My lord, my sister has expressed a desire to see no-one." She wilts a little, under his gaze, then straightens in borrowed insolence, Lucius' fingers tangled in hers. "Even you."

"And her wishes must be granted." He smiles and so do they, edged and far-from-sycophantic. Not borrowed insolence— it runs in their blood, and the boy is the only one of his victims he remembers. "Rabastan," these two entertain him perhaps too much, "perhaps you would prefer to retire?"

"No, my lord. Of course not. But, my lord, surely she is not...my lord, she is not to be raised as a Lestrange?"

Lucius, wildest and nearly-least-trustworthy, stops interrogating his wife to shoot an exasperated look at the Lestranges before stepping smoothly into the breach. "Narcissa and I are very conscious of the honour you confer on her family. And, my lord, if I may be so bold?"

"Yes, Lucius." His followers have always failed to marry the twin traits of intelligence and loyalty. It still amuses him to indulge them.

"Forgive me for talking of such things at a time like this, but I have been informed that certain Ministry officials plan to contact the Muggle Prime Minister in order to arrange for the security of the families of the more prominent Mudbloods."

"You are forgiven, Lucius. Tomorrow, you will tell me what it is you have heard." He moves closer to Lucius, traces a finger over the bruise that is no longer there. "All of it, my friend."

"Yes, my lord." No. It is not that they don't possess loyalty, but it lies mostly in directions that do not lead to him. And that, he must change soon.

"I would have expected more from you, Lucius. You know, do you not, that lying to me is entirely futile?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And you know, do you not, that I have only desisted from executing you because your wife's services were required."

"Yes, my lord."

"And you do know, Narcissa, that I do not hold the claims of family and blood as highly as you seem to?"

"My lord," now she comes to stand behind her husband, "you know our deepest loyalties are yours to command."

"Remember so. I shall not always be so clement." Her eyes are filled with implacable hatred—reflected hatred contained in his. Red serpent-slitted eyes reflected in her blue ones.

But the eyes he opens when he sits up, gasping, are green.

Chapter 2

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Who is the child?

"I'm going to ask Sirius." They all turn to look at him in the stunned silence that follows this statement. "What? We don't know whether it's a false dream or something Voldemort was really thinking about. So we can ask Sirius if it's something that actually happened."

"But, Harry," and Hermione's looking at him like he's a mentally-defective three-year-old. "Don't you think it's a bit... insensitive... to ask Sirius whether Bellatrix had a child or the dream you had was a false memory implanted by Voldemort?"

"I mean, mate, he might be a bit touchy about it, y'know, seeing as how she killed him and that's why he's dead?"

"Besides," says Ginny while he's trying to figure out whether what Ron just said was profound or stupid, "it might not have happened when he was alive."

"I think someone would have noticed if she was pregnant anytime during the last two years, don't you? Besides, they looked younger."

"Can you tell, with Voldemort?"

"Maybe his eyes were pink."

"Or his nose like a pig's."

"Or, or... maybe he looked like he was actually human."

"Right. If the peanut gallery's done, I think I'll go talk to Sirius."

"I hate to say this again," because you should have understood the first time, her expression adds, "but do you think that's a good idea?"

"I... dunno. But it's important, I think, that we know. And all the others are so... I mean, Tonks hardly changes her face anymore, except when she's undercover, and Remus always looks tired and... I'd ask the other portraits, but they don't like me much and Gran would help, but she's in Godric's Hollow, and it's too dangerous to go there, and Sirius won't mind, not really. It's important, Hermione."

She bites her lip, frowning at a patch of the wall behind Ginny's head. "Alright then. And if he says it's a fact, then we substantiate it. Given that she's a pureblood, there must have been announcements somewhere."

What a shock it was to enter number twelve, Grimmauld Place, two weeks into his summer holiday, in July 1996, and hear, instead of old Mrs. Black's shrieks, her son's voice. Sirius, needless to say, hadn't really been able to get along with most of the other portraits, though, when he put his mind to it, they gave him every bit of information he wanted, and that willingly. But since they always felt simultaneously offended by and proud of him within moments of the interrogation, he'd been moved away from them, into what had been his room. An oddly-different Sirius inhabited the portrait, though, than had inhabited the house the year he died. Not, according to Remus, the Sirius who he'd known before Azkaban. Not-quite, but, Harry felt, rather like the Sirius who'd lived in a cave for a year because Harry needed him. And that Sirius would do anything for him, which was why he'd not even thought that asking him about Bellatrix might not be the best thing to do. He'd almost told Hermione that, but she would only think he was being selfish and insensitive and self-absorbed. And she would be right, of course. But Sirius is/was/is the only father he'd had, and he's always had the impression that it was okay for children to be a bit selfish and insensitive and self-absorbed around their parents. Besides, it really is very important that he know whether Bellatrix Lestrange had a child with Lord Voldemort. He's not sure why, but it matters. Not just for the war, though it'll affect a lot of things, but for him, personally. It's going to change a lot of things.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 14

"I had this dream last night," he says.

"I had this dream last night," he says. It's hardly brilliant, as an opening gambit. But the thing is, it isn't one. Sirius talks to everyone, except Snape, which is simply because Snape had never entered his room, and, frankly, Harry, and everyone else, agree(s) that it should be kept that way, but it's a rare occasion to enter his room at 10:30 in the morning and find him already entertaining a visitor, especially when it's two days after full moon and the visitor is Remus Lupin. A very drawn Remus Lupin, true, but one who had been laughing until the very moment Harry had opened the door. Then he had sat there, and Harry had stood there, and Sirius had rolled his painted grey eyes at their awkwardness till Remus mumbled a goodbye and left.

"What, precisely, was that all about?"

"Nothing."

"Of course. And this nothing isn't in any way connected to the fact that he walked in on you, would it?"

"It wasn't anything like that." It hadn't been, really. Just that they'd been squabbling, him and Ron, and Hermione had tossed him a pillow and Ron had tried to grab it and they'd tussled, and by the time Remus had arrived, he'd been flat on his back, clutching the pillow, with Ron sitting on his legs and the girls grinning and throwing cushions and... well, it... "Just looked bad."

"I'm sure it did." He'd looked up, but Sirius had merely looked innocent. "Remus has a bit of a knack for this kind of thing."

And then he'd heard himself saying, though he'd planned on actually talking to Sirius for at least a bit before introducing the topic, "I had this dream last night."

Sirius smirks at him. "Shouldn't you be telling Ron? Or Ginny? Or what's her name, the girl with the strange ear-rings who came here last week and tried to tell me I was a manifestation of some strange mystic force? Or anyone who isn't your dead godfather?"

"I notice you didn't mention Hermione." Sirius is having a good day. And, yes, despite being the painted representation of a dead man, Sirius does, in fact, manage to have good days and bad days and days when nobody wants to talk to him. It's just one of the many apparently-impossible things Sirius does.

"Did you want me to?"

"No. Merlin, no." He takes a deep breath, the Hermione who lives in his head very irate. "Besides, it's not that kind of dream. Not mine at all, actually. I think," the last deep breath has left his lungs, "it's Voldemort's."

Sirius doesn't do anything more than frown and ask, "What about?"

"Did Bellatrix ever have a child?"

"Yes, actually. She had a son." Sirius' face has darkened into what Harry used to think was due to Azkaban's influence at work, and he has to learn someday how these portraits are painted because his dad's had glared at him last month and... "The week she murdered Regulus, as a matter of fact."

"Sirius, I'm..."

"But why would Voldemort be dreaming about Bella having a child?"

"I don't know. I... Sirius, do you know anything about it?"

"No. Nothing to know. Would have been seventeen."

"Would?"

"Yes. Died soon after. Nobody saw it, Meda said. What exactly did you see?"

"The Malfoys and the Lestrangle brothers. They came to tell him that the child was born, and he told them that it was an honour and..."

"That's it?"

"Yes. And Voldemort himself, of course and... Why would he say it was an honour?"

"I don't know, Harry." But Sirius does, or thinks, or suspects, or something. It shows. "Circe knows the bastard's conceited enough to think it's an honour he was in their house when their baby was born."

That is true, but it's not the real reason. It isn't and that nags at him after he leaves Sirius' room, after he tells the others, despite the fact that Hermione bullies them into searching through the Daily Prophet's issues for August and September 1980 and all they find is a birth announcement for Regis Lestrangle, and, a few weeks later, an obituary for the child.

Chapter 4

"Honestly. Harry. How many holidays has she spent at home with her parents?"

"It isn't there, Harry. I've looked. There's nothing to know, just like Sirius said." It's probably the third time she's said it, and being Hermione, she now sounds extremely annoyed that he is suggesting that there may be information she hasn't managed to root out from the materials available to her.

"But you said there was something odd."

"Oh, that. Rodolphus Lestrangle was in Romania during December, 1979; the society pages had a photo of him with the Romanian Minister."

It takes him a moment to get it, by which time Ginny, who had stuck with Hermione long after she'd thrown him and Ron out, is smirking and Hermione is trying not to. "You mean..."

"Probably not, actually," Hermione says, shuffling the papers into a neat pile, "But, if she was Voldemort's daughter, it would explain why he called it an honour."

He's not quite sure how he feels about Voldemort fathering children, except that he really doesn't want to think about it. But in some part of his mind—the part Fred usually calls girly and throws things at—he makes a connection. "Would have been seventeen if it hadn't died," he says. "Maybe that's why he was remembering."

"Right. That's sweet." Except that Hermione's face has twisted into something rather resembling a scowl. "Voldemort misses his baby. Glad we could clear that up for you, Harry." She leaves before he can formulate a response.

"What was that?" he says, after she's long-gone and he's reasonably sure she can't hear him. "What did I do?"

Ginny says nothing, which is unlike her, and just stares at him till he's feeling distinctly uncomfortable. "I have to find out whether you lot ever outgrow this."

"What?" He isn't sure what she means, but the tone makes it pretty clear it's meant to be insulting.

"Honestly. Harry. How many holidays has she spent at home with her parents?"

Well, she'd been at Grimmauld Place this year before he had reached, and last year she'd spent most of July helping put Godric's Hollow to rights and August wandering with him and Ron from The Burrow to Godric's Hollow to Grimmauld Place, working as not-overly-recognisable and perfectly-normal messengers for the Order members gone to ground there, and fifth year she'd been at Headquarters long before he had and fourth year she'd come to watch Quidditch World Cup and... "Oh," he says, comprehension dawning.

"Yeah. And, well, they know this is her world, but not even the most understanding parents in the world would stand for this."

"But she's..."

"I mean," she says, ignoring him completely, "can you imagine how Mum would behave if I had been nowhere near home for the last three years and was basically working as a child-soldier during my school-holidays?"

He can. In terrifying detail. "But there's nothing else we can do." *And that's what you are, Ginny, except the not being at home part.*

"Sure there is. She could just go live with them and forget all this life-endangering magic business. It's not too late for her to take her A-levels and get into a college. She could get in anywhere with the brains she's got."

"That's what they told her?" He can't imagine having no Hermione around, bossing him and telling him things and just being there, frizzy-haired and intellectual and always right. "But that's ridiculous. How do you stop being a witch or a wizard?"

"I know. But they're worried. They're her parents, Harry." But he doesn't know what that word means, not really. His parents are in albums and his dad's also in a portrait he found last year and the man who had any chance of being a father is in another. "It's not going to happen. She told them that. But then she had a row with her mum over the telephone..."

"Telephone," he corrects automatically. "Wait. What?"

"She wrote her Mum last week, but there was no answer and they're used to owls by now, so she got worried and we went down to the phone booth on the corner and she called her."

"Oh. That's why she's angry?"

"Well... she also thinks her parents have a point. She has been neglecting them a bit. She told me she'd wanted to at least visit them this month, but she never got the time."

"And tomorrow we're going back to school."

"Yeah. So, just stay out of her way for a bit, then?" He nods. "Good. And tell Ron, will you?"

He will. The last thing any of them need is for Ron to project the hearty, blustering self he's created over the last year, given Hermione is tense enough about her parents to call Regis Lestrangle a girl when it states clearly in the article that he's, well... a boy.

Chapter 5

"... you can visit them this weekend."

"You should start packing."

"Why?"

"Because," she's been only growing snappier in the last week, "we spoke to Professor McGonagall, and she said it was horrible that you hadn't been able to see your parents the last two years because you've been helping the Order, and as she's sure it won't affect your studies, you can visit them this weekend."

She frowns, and he knows, just knows, that both Weasleys have taken a step back. He doesn't blame them one bit—Hermione looks rather like McGonagall had when he'd first asked her for permission. "You told her that? Harry, why would you do something like that?"

"Cause you miss your parents and this Sunday's your eighteenth birthday?"

It seems to be the right answer, because Hermione grins at them and drags an old backpack out of her trunk. They all watched as she tossed in a shirt, reverently put a terrifyingly heavy book in, then said, "Grab the parchment, would you, Ron? Thanks."

At which point, just when the small stifling blanket of tension they'd been smothered by for two weeks (the large one was the war and had stuck around for twenty-plus years) seemed well and truly gone, Draco Malfoy walked in.

"Running away like the other Mudbloods, Granger?" And the worst of it is, Malfoy has more right to be here, in Hermione's room, than any of them do. He's Head Boy and his room's on the other side of their private study.

"Afraid you wouldn't be able to handle things on your own, Draco?"

"So you are running off." And he's sure he's wrong, but he thinks he sees disappointment crossing Malfoy's face.

"Back on Monday, Malfoy."

"Tch. And here I thought it'd be a longer respite." He smirks at her. Malfoy actually smirks at her. And doesn't get slapped.

"Do you actually have anything for me?" She stands up, packing somehow already finished.

"Here. The eight from Slytherin and Ravenclaw, for tonight's meeting."

"I have the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor numbers. Oh, the Quidditch Captains want to help..."

"I'll talk to Fischer tomorrow."

"Slytherin?"

"Well, in case you hadn't noticed, Granger, I'm it."

"Yes. But maybe one of the seventh-years could substitute? Unless you want to be a person short."

"And a vote short? No. Blaise can stand in for me. Daphne wants to talk to you, Granger."

"Again?"

"The child is stupid, Granger."

"But I told her not to annoy anyone..."

"Very rude of her, then, not to listen to you."

"If only she wouldn't associate with... with Slytherins so much."

"Daphne's her sister, Granger. And Blaise and I have known her since she was born."

"Look, Malfoy, what're you on about?"

"Ron, it's fine."

"No. He's got no right to talk to you like that."

"Oh, haven't I?" Malfoy hissed, moving pointedly away from Ron. "Do you know Astoria Greengrass, Weasley?"

"First-year, waist-high, black hair?" he ventures, because Ron clearly hasn't a clue.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Kudos to your astounding powers of observation, Potter."

"What's Hermione care about that?"

"She's being bullied by your house-mates, Weasley."

"So? We used to squabble as firsties."

"Quite. The subtle difference in this case is that she happens to be a Gryffindor herself and the people bullying her are third-years."

"Malfoy, I'll deal with this, alright."

"Fine. Do convince Daphne of that."

"Meeting's at eight, Malfoy," she says when he's at the door.

"Yes. And that's the second time this week. Once more and I'm telling the Headmaster. And, as Astoria's being a right little Gryffindor and not naming names, I'll be registering a complaint against all the third-years."

"You can't do that."

"Can't I, Ginevra? Potter and your brother think I can. Granger knows I can. She also knows I have desisted from deducting points, till now."

"I shall handle it."

"See that you do. And, Granger?"

"Yes, Malfoy?"

"Happy birthday."

Chapter 6

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If Granger had been back today then I wouldn't have told you.

"Little snake."

"Snake in the nest."

"Guess the magic's worn off the Hat."

"Have no sense of shame, do you, Greengrass?"

"I saw her talking to Malfoy."

"Everyone knows he's a Death-Eater."

"Really, Turner? Who's this everyone, then?"

"Well, his father is, anyway. Man was in Azkaban."

"So was Sirius Black, Turner."

"I... I didn't mean it that way."

"Better work on it, then, because that's how it sounded." He climbs across the bench, seating himself beside her. "Hullo, Astoria."

"Hullo, Harry." She's a kid he'd probably never have noticed otherwise, but she's the only firstie who calls him by his name and doesn't cower. That counts for something. "Draco sic you on me?" She's also the only one who's reckless enough to lash out at the Quidditch Captain, and that's not a bad thing either.

"No."

"Oh. Hermione, then. Look, I can take care of myself."

"I can see that," he says, touching a bruise on her arm.

"I don't know enough spells yet." With Malfoy and Zabini for friends, he'd have expected otherwise. "Not really, anyway. So I punched him on the jaw."

"Turner?"

"No. He's too tall." And she's tiny and he isn't entirely sure he wants to know how many other injuries she's hiding if she got into a fist-fight with Turner and his friends. "Kramer."

"Ah." Kramer is short (though that still means he has several inches on her) and thin and looks, at present, like a hurricane with claws hit him. "Are you sure all you did was punch him?"

"Astoria fights dirty. Don't let her fool you, Potter."

"Why do you keep appointing baby-sitters for me, then?"

"I couldn't appoint Potter if I tried; I have nothing he wants. You will now go to the Slytherin table."

"Why?"

"Your mother sent things."

"Oh? And this isn't a ploy to make me leave?"

"I don't know, Astoria. Could be. Or it could be that Daphne forgot her Potions supplies and Sassy smuggled the chocolates you like into the package."

"Chocolates and first years," he says. Astoria nearly knocks Malfoy over in her haste to get out of her seat.

"Belgian chocolate," Malfoy corrects, sliding into it. "Granger back yet?"

"No."

"Is that why the Weasleys aren't here?" It is, but something stops him from telling Malfoy that. "I see. Potter, come with me."

"Why?"

"Because your lion-cubs are getting ready to roar and I," he raises his voice a little, "don't wish to remind them so early in the morning that I am the Head Boy and they are tiny third-years who can lose a lot of House points if they annoy me. So come on."

Head Boy. Draco Malfoy is Head Boy. And it doesn't hurt his throat to say because somewhere during the last year, Malfoy changed. He's still an infuriating bastard, but he's stopped announcing it in every step. He co-operates with them now, save when it suits him, and even then the excuses he comes up with appease McGonagall and

Snape. And it seems like there's a different man walking in his steps—and he's not sure whether he's sorry for that man or scared what he might accomplish.

"This is far enough, I think." They're in the Entrance Hall, at the foot of the stairs. "Sit down, Potter."

"What is it?"

"Granger won't be coming back."

"Really?"

"My mother sent me a letter last night. If Granger had been back today, then I wouldn't have told you. But they must have done the spells. And she's who they've been looking for. She's not going to come back."

"What are you talking about?"

"My aunt had a child with Voldemort."

"Regis," he says. "He died."

"You know about that! Why do you know that, Potter?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well. Yes. You see, Potter, Regis didn't die because he never lived. Aunt Bella had a daughter. And they left her in charge of a Muggle couple."

"What? Why? They hate Muggles."

"It's Aunt Bella and the Dark Lord, Potter. Do you want to ask them why they do what they do?"

"And they've decided it's Hermione?" She's adopted. He's known that for years.

"There are spells."

"Why now?"

"Turned seventeen."

"No. It can't be her, then. Hermione turned eighteen."

"That's what the Muggles thought. Ageing potion, Potter. Surely you've heard about those?"

"Why should I believe you?"

"You needn't. Believe Weasley." Because Ron has just run in, face shockingly white, holding a letter.

Chapter 7

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What I don't understand," says Ginny, after Ron has finally run out of wild theories, "is why it wasn't announced at breakfast today."

"What I don't understand," says Ginny, after Ron has finally run out of wild theories, "is why it wasn't announced at breakfast today. She got kidnapped on Sunday. Nobody could find her. We got the letter Monday after breakfast. Why didn't Dumbledore announce it today? He must have known before us."

"Maybe because there weren't any signs of violence?"

"But that doesn't mean anything. It's Voldemort. He could just use the Imperius."

"So why wouldn't Dumbledore say anything?"

"And the wards... Tonks says they just... dissolved."

"But they were tied to her. Nobody intending harm could get through."

"Maybe he wasn't," he says, a little surprised to find it so hard to speak.

"What?"

"It's Voldemort. Of course he intended harm."

"Maybe not. Do you remember Regis LeStrange?"

"Merlin, Harry! Hermione's been kidnapped and you're worrying about Bellatrix LeStrange's spawn?"

"Oh," says Ginny, sounding nothing like the brash girl who can out-hex her brothers (yes, even Bill) and a lot like the terribly shy girl he'd first met. "Harry, you're not saying that Hermione is... but... Harry?"

"I think I am," he says, looking up. Ginny is sitting on the chair Hermione was using the day before she left, and he can see, behind Ron's head, a photograph of all of them. Her room and he's not sure why they're here—because it's comforting to be surrounded by her things, because it makes it seem likely that she'll come in at any moment, or

because it's the one place that grants a semblance of privacy. "Or, at least, I'm saying Voldemort thinks she is."

"But that's..." But it's not only not-impossible, it's not even implausible. That's the worst of it. Hermione is adopted, yes, but all that means is that she isn't the Grangers' biological child. There weren't adoption agencies or orphanages or anything. They just saw a little girl crying in a shop, couldn't find anyone who knew who she was, asked the local authorities, took her home when their holiday was finished, then adopted her when nobody came hunting, though the police knew where to find them.

"Come off it, Harry! You can't be saying that!"

"I am. Ron, think about it."

"So, she's been kidnapped. Why does that mean she's Voldemort's daughter? I'm not even convinced that Regis was Voldemort's. Could just as easily be LeStrange's."

He nods. Ron's anger has an almost-tangible fear laced through it. If Hermione isn't Hermione, then a large part of their world comes crashing down. "I know. And I don't know why I'm saying this. I just think this is how it is." But Hermione is still Hermione, isn't she; if her parents aren't Muggle dentists who want to take her away from them? "And it's the only way it makes sense. Why else would Voldemort kidnap her? And the Grangers? And why wouldn't the wards at least try to stop him?"

"I don't know, alright? But I don't... why are you... you didn't even seem surprised when I told you."

"I knew already," he mumbles, looking everywhere except at Ron.

"Harry, have you been having those dreams again? You didn't say anything."

"No. Not dreams. Not since the one about her... him... you know... being born."

"Then how did you know?"

"Malfoy told me," he says, tensing for the outburst.

"Malfoy? That scum knew she was going to be kidnapped? He knew and said nothing! And you just sat there and listened to him? He's the one who told you Hermione was Voldemort's daughter, isn't he?" He nods. "And you believed him?"

He did. He does. He doesn't know why, but he does. He believes Malfoy wants to become a Death-Eater. He knows Malfoy would enjoy harming him. But a lot of things that are harder to define struggle against that knowledge. Malfoy's not opposed them since fifth year. He's been formally, rigidly polite to Hermione. A lot of the Ravenclaw kids and almost all the Slytherins treat him more as a mentor than the bully he was. And he finds it rather impossible to believe that those exact eyes could be used to lie to him, when they're not Malfoy eyes at all. "Why would he lie?"

"I don't know! He's Draco Malfoy. Why does he lie?"

"Erm... usually so that my parents scold him instead of me," says a small voice somewhere near the door. They all turn to look at Astoria, who shrinks under their glares. "And he said there's information he's willing to share if you come into the study."

Chapter 8

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"Why would I lie, Potter? You can't possibly imagine I enjoy the idea of Granger being my cousin?"

"Give Astoria your wands."

"Why? Why should we listen to you?"

"Draco, I'm beginning to understand your point." He smiles. Daphne tends to think not-too-badly of the Gryffindors, but also leaves them strictly to themselves. "Because we've already done so ourselves, Mr. Weasley. And because the news you are going to hear is of a somewhat disturbing nature, and I'd rather none of us is tempted."

"Please, Harry?" And he knows Astoria's an absolute imp, knows she's been practicing that smile for years, knows exactly what effect it has. They buckle, Weasley last, hand over their wands and take their seats at the other side of the table. It's fairly crowded, though both Daphne and Blaise have turned traitor and taken the couch, leaving him with only the Gryffindors for company. Astoria, all six wands in hand, goes to sit in front of the fireplace.

"We're here. We're wandless. So, tell us whatever it was you wanted to talk about." Potter's on the edge. Potter, bastard, has no bloody right to be on the edge.

"Draco?" And if he doesn't tell them, Blaise will. And grin at him, later.

"Potter's told you why Granger's been kidnapped, I take it?"

"He said you told him she's Voldemort's daughter."

Morgana! These fools are... He's going to have to win their confidence, now of all times. "It's true, Ginevra."

"You've got to realize, Malfoy, that we've no reason to believe you." Ah, Potter's trying to be rational. How nice, and how extremely stupid, considering he knows Potter believes him.

"Why would I lie, Potter? You can't possibly imagine I enjoy the idea of Granger being my cousin?"

"For more reasons than one, he doesn't." Blaise smirks at Daphne, who, godsdamned ice-queen, pretends she's not just said it.

"Maybe you think we'll not hunt for her."

"Isn't that ridiculous? I hardly think you're pleased to hear that she's their child. And since I haven't told you where she's being held, I fail to see why you would stop searching for her." Sit down, Weasley. Sit down and shut up, and let me see whether anyone will make use of Daphne's 'accidental slip'.

“What reason?” There you are, Ginevra, right on cue.

“Hmm?” Blaise says, lazy, half-shut eyes and indolence.

“What reasons does he have for not wanting Hermione as a cousin?”

“I really don’t know. She’s far preferable to the company he’s kept in the past.”

“D’you remember what Parkinson did when Lucius was released? Absolute disgrace.” Thank you, Daphne. Now we definitely have Potter’s attention.

“Why are you comparing Hermione to Pansy Parkinson?”

He stays silent under Potter’s speculative suspicious gaze, and Blaise waits till the Weasleys are looking at him as well. It is important that they look at him. They won’t trust him if they do not see his face. No reason for them to trust him even so, but they will. “The Dark Lord wants him to marry her.”

“WHAT?”

“Sweet Circe, if you must scream, do it where the rest of us needn’t hear, won’t you, Weasley? I don’t see why you’re so surprised.”

“Why does he want this?” So, you’re not interested in her, are you, Potter? Not like Weasley is.

“It’s Aunt Bella and the Dark Lord, Potter,” he says, reckless.

“Somebody must have asked them,” Potter says. Why is he playing along?

“I cannot understand why this puzzles you,” Blaise says, “especially you, Ginevra. Surely you’re familiar with the concept?”

Potter looks at Daphne, at Astoria, at Blaise, at Ginevra, at Daphne again, then at him. “Tell me.”

“It makes political sense,” he mutters. “And, well, the Dark Lord’s...”

“A jumped-up fool,” Daphne declares. Everyone turns to gape at her. Blaise shoots him a small warning glance. “What? He calls himself Slytherin’s heir, but really, all that means is some Gaunt married a Slytherin girl about ten or twelve generations before Riddle was born. They were a tired old line, gone to the Crups, and he’s not even a pureblood.”

“I thought all purebloods...”

“Oh, no, Potter, that’s not it at all. Most of us just found it convenient to not register much of a protest during the first war. This time may be rather different. At any rate, most of his followers are pretending, just like he is. And blood-purity hardly equates power. I grant you’ll find some aristocrats, like the Lestranges, or our spoiled boy’s parents. But... well, Potter, you’d be more welcome at a wizarding soiree than he would. He can force the doors open, but he’s trying to gain an invitation.”

“Marrying up?”

“Yes, Potter.” Finally. “His daughter has Black blood in her. That family’s older than Hogwarts. He wants her to marry me, so that he can form an alliance with the Malfoys.”

“And that’s why you want to help us?” Pretty little Ginny Weasley, fingers nearly touching Potter’s wrist. Not helping her brother at all, though Weasley is staring like he’s been attacked by out-of-control Bludgers. What fascinating little games he can play with her, but now’s not the time. “So you don’t have to marry Hermione?”

“Among other things,” he drawls, standing, “which concern you not at all, Ginevra.” Daphne gathers their wands from Astoria. Blaise inclines his head at Ginny Weasley, sure to have spotted the possibilities. They stand at the door, waiting for him. It has seemingly gone well, till now, but they know how dangerous this game is that he’s trying to play, though they don’t yet know just what it is, and they know that he hasn’t secured Potter’s assistance yet. “But I am not lying to you.” If Potter agrees, the others will follow suit. He needs Potter to agree.

“I know,” Potter says, almost unwillingly, and this round is won.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 14

He trusts her, trusts them, but... Circe, this would be so much easier if he still associated with Crabbe and Goyle.
Though Crabbe and Goyle wouldn’t have understood enough to help.

“And when are you going to tell us what you’re plotting?”

“What plot?” he asks, supercilious expression firmly in place.

“Why are you helping them?” That expression never works on Daphne and only rarely on Blaise.

“I am?”

“You need our help, Draco.” Blaise has, as usual, migrated towards warmth, and his face, against the fire, can hardly be seen. “You need it, and we’ve given it and will continue to give it.”

“But you must tell us what we’re helping you with.” He trusts her, trusts them, but... Circe, this would be so much easier if he still associated with Crabbe and Goyle. Though Crabbe and Goyle wouldn’t have understood enough to help.

“And please don’t tell us what you told them. Even if she escapes, she’ll still be related to you.”

“But I won’t have to marry her.”

Daphne sighs. "If you're going to be difficult, I'll leave. And I certainly won't allow Astoria to be involved in this unless I'm certain what it is."

"I'm only doing what I've been told to," he says. "All last year, everybody kept telling me to co-operate with Potter and his bunch. I'm co-operating."

"Aren't you obedient," Blaise drawls. "And how do you profit by helping Potter? In fact, Draco, how do you plan on helping him?"

"I don't." They glare at him. "Not in any material way."

"Oh?"

"I can hardly help break her out, now can I?"

"I imagine it wouldn't be too hard," Daphne smiles, "considering you know where she's being held. Considering it's your house she's being held in."

He bows, acknowledging the hit. "But I also know better than to cross my aunt. According to Mother, she's very taken with her only child."

"And expresses her love in-between Cruciatusii?"

"No. Morgana, no. Bellatrix Lestrange," he pauses, letting it sink in, "is waiting hand-and-foot on Hermione Granger and is extremely upset her darling daughter isn't overjoyed to see her."

"You cannot possibly be serious."

"Oh, I am. I rather wish I could go home, but I very much doubt Snape will let me."

"And the Dark Lord?"

"Quite concerned, but he's letting Aunt Bella take care of things at the time."

"Draco, are you sure your mother isn't shielding you? She does tend to get overprotective."

She does. And that's why, despite being Lucius Malfoy's son and Bellatrix Lestrange's nephew, he's still not a Death Eater. "Quite sure. Father's written as well. And confesses himself rather surprised to be hosting Muggles. And that too in a relatively unharmed condition."

"He's letting the Grangers live?"

"As I said, Blaise, they're besotted."

"And entertaining as this is, you've still not told us what you're planning."

"Daphne, who do you think will win this war?"

"It isn't a war yet. And it might not come to that."

"It will, sooner or later. And now you're avoiding the question."

"I'd bet on Dumbledore," she says, resolutely not looking at him. "He's a madman, same as the Dark Lord, but... I don't think he cares whether he stays alive or not. Nor, I think, do most of his... is followers the right word?"

"Whereas most of the Death-Eaters do," Blaise laughs. "I can't see Lucius taking an Avada Kedavra for the Dark Lord."

"Neither can I." He smiles. "I'd bet on Dumbledore as well."

"And you think this is a way to get into his good books?"

"I think I'm going to be corresponding with my fiancée. And I think I shall give her friends information about how she feels and how she's being treated. And I think I shall leave the country as soon as I finish school. I have a great-aunt who lives in Alexandria who'd be delighted to see me."

"You think you'll be allowed to leave?"

"I believe so. If, at the end of the year, Granger's still with Aunt Bella, I'll take her to see all the places she would have, if she'd been properly brought up. If not," he shrugs, "I doubt either of you plan on staying in England for the war."

"It's hardly the same," Blaise says. He's come away from the fire. Daphne's straightened from her lazy sprawl.

"Defection is hardly new," he says, throat suddenly dry.

"You think Dumbledore would help you hide?"

"He helped Snape," he says, "and I've never helped kill anyone." He doesn't know whom Snape is a spy for. His parents' opinion, which he's inclined to agree with, is that Severus Snape is on his own side.

"And your parents?"

"They survived the first war."

"But Lucius has been sent to Azkaban since."

"Less than five months," he says, voice too casual. Five months without his father. Five months watching his mother being desperately brave. "They couldn't find enough evidence to hold him longer, even with all the witnesses Dumbledore dragged out."

"Lupin wasn't allowed to testify," Daphne points out.

"Yes. Isn't prejudice wonderful?" And, of course, neither could dear cousin Dora, or Shackbolt, given that they should have informed the Ministry before rushing in to fight. Legal procedure doesn't really work in wars.

"So you plan to run away and let your parents suffer?"

"Not quite. I plan on staying alive, and my parents plan on doing whatever it takes to ensure my welfare."

They share a glance; then Blaise grins at him. "Do try to be less melodramatic, Draco. It's rather exasperating."

He smirks. They'll help. Even help smuggle him out of the country if necessary. "Well, it'll help us get along with the Gryffindors, won't it then?"

“Especially Potter,” Daphne says, soft and sweet and oh-so-innocent.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the Weasleys won’t trust you anyway. And you do need Potter to believe you’re telling him the truth, don’t you?”

He nods, resolutely ignoring her smile.

Chapter 10

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Yours,
Draco.

Mother,

I doubt she will prove at all amenable to the concept of having Aunt Bella and the Dark Lord as parents. You suggest that she be informed that the continued safety of the Muggles depends on her accepting her true parents. But it is highly unlikely that such threats will have much, or indeed any, effect. She’s a willful, headstrong girl—in fact, she rather resembles her mother in that respect. She’s rather careless as regards personal safety, as well. Though I imagine it is implausible, if not outright impossible, that she will actually be exposed to any real danger. And, from what I know of Hermione, she’s only too well aware of that fact. She’s an intelligent girl and, as long as she believes she has nothing to lose, will not co-operate in any way. From her perspective, her parents (I refer here to the Muggles, of course) are going to die, are perhaps already dead, and she is a prisoner and will remain so. So, no, my Mother, coercion will not work, and you have not, until now, offered her anything she wants. You have a long wait ahead of you. It would be a pity were Aunt Bella to lose her tenuous hold on her temper.

Yours,

Draco.

Mother,

If you believe that it will make her more likely to submit to her parents’ wishes, I’ll certainly write. I confess myself at a loss to understand how it will help, as we were never on amicable terms, however. Find the letter enclosed.

Yours,

Draco.

Hermione,

My mother wishes us to correspond. I doubt, however, that I have anything to say that you wish to hear, especially given the circumstances.

However, as I cannot send a letter this short, and as you took some interest in her, though I do not know whether that was to keep your House’s reputation pristine or because you actually cared about her, I think I shall tell you about Astoria. Since your departure a week ago, she has managed to gain the admiration of three of her class-mates, entirely antagonize the third-years, and befriend Potter and Ginevra Weasley. As a matter of fact, I rather believe that her friendship with them is what keeps her from becoming a resident of the Hospital Ward. Certainly, she is far too callous—inviting malevolence and hatred is all very well, but doing so at such great risk to oneself is extremely foolish. Especially when she would lose so little by at least pretending to cease all communications with us. It’s highly doubtful that her House-mates would find out that she had not in fact stopped meeting us. She has classes with Slytherins—she could easily use one of them to pass on any messages. Suffering because of something as ephemeral as a principle is a concept I, for one, am entirely unable to understand. But you’ve already told her to mix less with us—I’m afraid I’m at such a loss for words that I’m parroting yours. My apologies. You must be rather bored by this.

I shall understand fully if you are resentful. And I hardly expect there to be a reply to this letter. But I shall hardly be disappointed if there is.

Draco Malfoy.

Hermione,

No. It is rather surprising that there has been no such announcement. But perhaps Dumbledore does not wish your parentage disclosed. Which is odd, isn’t it, considering he claims that one’s parentage in no way affects how a witch/wizard should be treated? I believe your friends have been informed. In fact, I am almost sure, given how they looked on Monday morning. How they know and who informed them, I am, obviously, not aware of. But I can certainly tell you that your absence is causing a certain level of unease among the students, especially the sixth and seventh-years, who consider themselves well-informed. I hope that answers your queries.

Draco Malfoy.

Do they blame you? Do you believe that they should? Or are you merely being a Gryffindor and indulging in self-flagellation? You are all masochists in disguise, you and your friends. There are many, Hermione, who are suffering more for less. They hold a place in your life that the Dark Lord claims as his. Be grateful they are alive and unmolested. Remember, please, that the woman you are dealing with celebrated killing both her cousins, both of whom she had known since they were born. And yet the Grangers are alive. They have even been allowed to see you. You have brains enough to realize the significance of this. Attempt to do so, instead of wallowing in guilt.

Draco Malfoy.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 14

Professor Lupin, appointed despite the previous debacle. Old Man Lupin, gone completely grey though he can't be forty, Loony loopy Lupin, who can make Snape laugh.

"Submit your essays on Monday. Harry, Draco, if you would please stay back?"

"Yes, Professor?" Professor Lupin, appointed despite the previous debacle. Old Man Lupin, gone completely grey though he can't be forty, Loony loopy Lupin, who can make Snape laugh.

"I understand there is a prefects' meeting today?"

"Yes."

"Hermione was the one who made the arrangements, wasn't she?"

He feels Potter stiffen slightly. So touchy about her, but at least he gets her letters and her friends have to depend on him for news of her. "She finalized the arrangements, yes. But I am fully capable of doing this on my own." He does not want, will not tolerate, some bumbling fool or over-efficient suck-up in her place.

"But you must find it difficult, given your duties as Quidditch Captain and Head Boy, to assume even more responsibility? And your course-load for the NEWTs is hardly light."

"I told her I could manage." He's not sure why he said that, it sounds stupid and childish, but Potter looks at him, startled and pleased, and he suspects Daphne would laugh at him for wondering.

"Doubtless," Lupin says, "but at the time, she thought she would be gone two days, not as many weeks."

"So you're appointing a new Head Girl?"

"Not quite, Harry. For one, I have no power to do so. For another, well, Dumbledore feels it unwise to deprive Hermione of a post she may soon be able to resume."

"Of course." He enjoys Lupin's deceptive earnestness, though it makes it hard not to smile, especially considering he can faintly see the shape of the solution that has been thought up. And Potter most definitely cannot.

"So I've been told to ask you, Harry, whether you would mind helping Draco."

"I don't mind," he smirks. "Potter would make a splendid Head Girl."

Potter glares at him, half-flushed. "Remus, do you really think..."

"Oh, I do, about a variety of things, most of which, I confess, concern this not at all. But I would certainly be interested in hearing any other solutions you can come up with."

"Padma, perhaps? Or Hannah Abbot?" Grasping at straws, Potter.

"That would make it official. And it would be unfair to ask any of the girls to do the work without the recognition. Harry. This is all entirely informal, which is why I'm the one talking to you. You can refuse if you wish to."

"Why?"

"Because you can hardly be coerced into assuming Hermione's tasks?"

"No, why's it all informal? Why has nothing been announced yet? Dumbledore announces the deaths or disappearances of everyone else. Why not this?"

"Because, Harry," Lupin glances at him, clearly discomfited, "that would make this seem like an act of aggression, when it may well not be so."

"How can you say that? They kidnapped her."

"But she is quite safe, as are the Grangers. Not so, Draco?"

"Safer than Potter thinks her to be," he says. Her latest letter is in his bag, but he hasn't had a chance to read it yet.

"But she was kidnapped." Potter sounds like he's found one certainty and will not be budged.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps her parents took her away, on her seventeenth birthday, from the people she'd been given to for safe-keeping."

He realizes he's never seen Potter truly angry. "So you're going to sit here and do nothing to rescue her? You're just going to let Bellatrix and Voldemort keep her? You're trusting to Bellatrix's family feeling? After what she did to Sirius? Remus, how can you even..."

"Harry." Old Man Lupin has a command-voice after all, then. He was beginning to doubt it.

"I'm not sorry, Remus. Don't you dare expect me to be."

"You're allowing your anger to cloud your judgment. I never said nobody was trying to bring Hermione back. I'm sure Draco could give you details."

"It's unlikely I shall," he says.

"Will you help, Harry?" Low gentle voice, and he's very sure he doesn't want to dwell upon the way it makes Potter move away from the edge of barely-restrained anger, as though Lupin's had a lot of practice doing just that. Some truths are better left unknown—it's none of his concern, anyway, what shape Lupin's seen Potter in, to be an

expert at this. Snape might want to know, but he doesn't.

"Of course. That's really not what I meant."

"I know, Harry."

"Remus, I'm..."

"Good afternoon, Professor. Potter, I'll see you an hour before the meeting. If you're helping, you need to know certain things."

"Sure."

"Good afternoon, Draco."

He shuts the door, leans against it, trying to ignore the soft murmur of voices. He really does not want to know why Potter is apologizing for being angry on Hermione's behalf. And he wants even less to know why Lupin can make him calm down.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 14

Potter's getting caught up despite himself, and that's good, because it'll make this week's preparations much less awkward than last week's.

"Change it around."

"They're both Hufflepuff prefects."

"Pevensie and Mitchell are currently not on speaking terms. So, unless you want a bloodbath, or, well, given that they're both Hufflepuffs, icy politeness and refusal to cooperate, it might be a bad idea to put them together, specially on that side of the castle."

"Why?" Potter's getting caught up despite himself, and that's good, because it'll make this week's preparations much less awkward than last week's.

"Pevensie's got a boyfriend in Ravenclaw and they tend to meet up on the Arithmancy corridor. Just chat, mostly, but it'd only push Mitchell further."

"How," says Potter, suspicion almost palpable, "do you know this?"

"Observation, Potter. Put those fabled Seeking skills to some use." Potter glares at him, more-than-half exasperated. "Fine. Daphne told me."

The glare doesn't disappear, but it changes till the exasperation is tinged with something he would think perilously close to affection, if this weren't Potter. "Williams, then, with Pevensie?"

"Sure. And Ginevra, I think, with Mitchell. She can handle him."

"You don't sound too sure." Potter smiles, and there, again, is the thread of not-affection.

"Lupin was right. Hermione managed the pairings, the first month." Potter nods. "Potter?"

"Malfoy?"

"Bored, Potter?"

"Somewhat, yeah." He shakes his head, smiles ruefully. "Bet Remus is having a good laugh about it."

Lupin. "Did you not do enough research for his assignments?" Please let his voice not sound petty. Especially since it's Potter.

"No. Remus is... it's hard to describe, really." Damn it all to Hades. What's too hard for Potter to describe? "He was one of my dad's closest friends. And Sirius' as well. After Sirius died, he... he didn't take on the role, but he's... kind of a father-figure. Except not really, because he's far too pedantic and reasonable to be anyone's father."

"Hard to describe," he says.

"Yes." And he's oddly grateful that he hasn't made a complete fool of himself. Of course it's sadly innocent. Of course. And he really needs to stop letting his mind take walks down irrational corridors. "Here. Will this do?"

"Let's see... yes. It should. Of course, you do realize this'll be passed off as my work?"

Potter shrugs. "Just means you'll get blamed for all my mistakes."

He puts the parchment down just in time to catch a strained smile cross Potter's face. "You really can refuse to help me, y'know."

"It's too much for one person. I don't know how you managed alone."

He's doing it because it's right. Of course he is—Saint Potter. Bastard. "Mostly because I've far too good an opinion of myself to tolerate looking stupid," he says.

"I hadn't noticed," Potter drawls. "You looked pretty stupid a number of times last year."

"Oh, in front of," *you* "Granger doesn't count. At least two of the professors look stupid around her."

"Looked." And Potter looks like he had back in fifth year, after Black died.

"Looked," he says firmly, "and will again. She's alive, Potter."

"For how long?"

"She's..." Angry, and scared, and more than a little perturbed by Bellatrix's constant affection and the fact that the Dark Lord was human. "Hermione's fine. She told me to make sure you knew that."

"Why should I believe you?" And there's nothing he can say to that. Nothing he will. He gets up, instead, and walks to his bureau of drawers. "Malfoy."

"I trust you can recognize her handwriting," he says, laying her letters on the table. "And these are the ones I wrote her."

"Malfoy..."

He holds up a hand. "Do attempt to return them after you're done. And please ask Weasley to resist the temptation of distributing them for general reading in the Gryffindor common room."

"You needn't give me these if they're... personal." Potter stumbles over the word, and it makes him look up, just in time to see his stricken expression.

"I would've given you them before if they weren't," he drawls. "Really, Potter, they're to and from my fiancée; did you expect them to contain details about class schedules and assignments?"

"Well, yes, actually, considering they're from and to Hermione." He sighs, inclines his head in assent. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"You can hardly avoid it," he says, pulling the patrolling scroll towards him.

"Malfoy?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 14

"It cannot be because the Muggles are free. That's pleasing news... Why isn't it pleasing news?"

"Why am I here?"

"Because I need to hold try-outs this weekend and I want to look at the pitch before I book it."

"You haven't answered me."

"They let the Muggles go." Blaise tugs at him, large hand wrenched in his robes and he turns, unwilling, face averted. "Is there a reason you're mauling me in the middle of the pitch?"

"Why," says Blaise, knotting his fingers tighter into the cloth, "are you so worked up? You were up at six. You have Nott making what he thinks are snide remarks about us. You have me out on the pitch at eight bloody a.m. It cannot be because the Muggles are free. That's pleasing news."

He looks at Blaise, finds himself unable to keep looking.

"Draco." He's being a child. He's being a child and he knows it because both Blaise's hands are on his shoulders and he used that tone on Astoria when she was younger. "Why isn't it pleasing news?"

"They've let her parents leave, and she's too damn noble to say she's anything but relieved, and she's got nothing to keep her from breaking completely."

"Except you."

And that, and the compassionate expression that looks uncomfortable on Blaise's face, make him laugh and slump till Blaise is nearly holding him up. "And me," he says. "She hated me till a year ago. She doesn't... why the hell should she trust me?" He pulls away from Blaise. "I've no idea how I'll tell Potter."

"Well, don't then. I'm sure he'll be informed by Lupin or McGonagall or even Dumbledore himself. Though," he grins at a passing Hufflepuff, who scowls at him—rather virulently, he notes—"I doubt the old man has the time."

"He knows I wrote to her. He'll be expecting the answer."

"You gave him the letters." He will not look at Blaise. "Draco..."

"He needs to trust me."

"You need him to trust you."

"It's politically expedient." He can feel the amused stare on his back and turns to glare.

"You had other reasons even with Parkinson, Draco."

"Well, yes," he drawls, "she's incredibly easy."

"Is she?"

"You cannot possibly be ignorant of that fact." Nott's been giving detailed descriptions to Goyle the last several months.

"You're trying to avoid the topic. Again, Draco."

He sighs, steals a glance at Blaise, who looks incredibly amused by the whole thing, looks away, over the pitch, deserted other than two girls near the other goalpost. "It'll annoy the Weasleys, at least." He buries his hands in his hair. This is how far he's gone. Annoying the Weasleys is all the justification he can offer. Circe!

"Him, yes," Blaise smiles, pulling his hands away. "Don't. Potter's hardly that bad. And it won't help if you turn yourself bald."

He pulls free, grinning madly. "No, he is just that bad. Worse."

"Doubtless you know better than I. You've been obsessed since you saw him in Diagon."

He'd gone home and babbled at length about Diagon Alley and the boy he'd seen and the dirty gamekeeper and his new wand and his potions supplies and the strange boy he'd met, all at an ever-suffering Blaise. "Took me long enough... what do you mean it'll annoy him? It'll annoy her far worse."

"You really have been preoccupied, haven't you, Draco?" And it's his due to be laughed at. Damn it, what's he missed? Bloody Potter and bloody Bella and this whole fucking mess makes him unable to pick up hints.

"Are you trying to bed her?" He remembers Blaise's quiet, speculative glance at her, and Ginevra is rather pretty. Odd, with those parents, but true. "I really don't need more trouble."

Blaise flashes him a broad smile, teeth very white. "Expect trouble, Draco. And not from me."

He follows Blaise's extremely smug glance to the girls—one of whom has red hair, and the other... "Merlin! Again?"

"She's discreet."

"Little Ginny Weasley," he mutters. Little Ginny Weasley, who has an arm linked through Daphne's and... "Her mother's going to die of shame."

The grin Blaise flashes him this time is distinctly wolfish. "Her daughter and her almost-son. I daresay she will."

"Does Weasley know?"

"I doubt it."

"Hmm... well, let's not disturb them."

"Since when are you so generous?"

"I'm not." It's just that he can hear people behind him. "Hullo, Potter."

"Malfoy."

"Weasley."

"Zabini. Malfoy."

"I'm booking the pitch for this Saturday," he says, ignoring Weasley, stepping back slightly so that the girls can be seen.

"From when to when?"

"Whole morning. I'm holding try-outs."

"How many for?" Potter's awkward. How much did he hear?

"All seven. So..."

"Stay out of here on Sunday, then. I need a new Beater."

"Slytherin actually holds try-outs," Weasley, please stop sneering and look at your sister. Go on, then. "Why? Nobody's daddies offered to buy their children in?"

"We all know Flint was lacking in intelligence, don't we?" Blaise drawls, crowding Weasley away from him and Potter. Right into direct line of sight for the girls. "And I don't remember you being so cock-sure when we won the Quidditch Cup."

"Fluke," Weasley snarls.

"We'll be testing that theory, won't we? When I bat a Bludger at you and you fall right through the goals. Just. Like. Last. Year."

Potter looks vaguely frustrated by this. It's unlike Blaise to be so obnoxious, even around Weasley, but... "Oi, that's Ginny."

"It is, isn't it?" Blaise shifts again, this time blocking them. "So?"

He stifles a grin. "Blaise, we have class." Blaise nods, face stony over what he knows is a maniacal grin. Blaise likes Weasley even less than he does. "Let's go, then. I've got to meet Fischer and Lewis and tell them I'm booking the pitch. Potter," he says, twisting—Weasley's pulled Potter away, a bit—"shall I tell them Gryffindor wants it on Sunday morning?"

"Afternoon. And I'll tell Fischer, he's patrolling with me. If you would tell Amanda..."

"Sure."

They all end up leaving the pitch, Potter and Weasley dawdling a little, because their first class is Defense Against the Dark Arts and Lupin, who he's beginning to suspect knows far more than he should, cheerfully pairs them all off to duel—two against two, leaving him with Potter as companion and Blaise and Weasley as opponents (something about facing enemies who know your every move, and being forced to fight with and for those whose fighting style you do not know well). Potter and he win, but he can't help thinking that Blaise held back.

And when Potter comes up to him after lunch to tell him that the Grangers have been set free, he smiles and does not tell Potter why that news scares him.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 14

And tumbling out of the fireplace in their shared room in Hogwarts, Hermione holding on to him.

Of course, Mother.

Draco.

He steps into his father's study, momentarily disoriented. A hand catches his shoulder, steadying him. His father, eyes blank, mouth twisted into a forced smile. "Draco."

"Father."

"You've been informed, I trust?"

"Of course, Father."

"And put it to good use?" He nods, suddenly nervous. His father cannot possibly know... "Very well. Come along." Then he is being escorted—carefully—down the corridor, to his aunt's suite.

Where his mother is waiting, and Aunt Bella and Hermione, who looks pale and quiet and jarringly too-like his mother and hers. "Mother."

"Draco."

"Draco, dear." Bellatrix Lestrange, who was stroking her daughter's hair—she flinches minutely the moment her mother leaves her—rises from the bed and clasps his hand. "You'll take care of her, won't you? Because I'm only letting her go because you'll take care of her."

His mother sighs, trades a glance with Hermione. "Of course he will, Bella. He's going to marry her, isn't he?"

He smiles at her. "Of course, Aunt. How could I not? Hermione, we should leave before I'm missed."

She gets up, walks to him—avoids her mother, and she is Bella's daughter, impossible to see them so close and not know that—and smiles. "Of course, Draco."

Bellatrix smiles again, the maniac gleaming through the cracks of the mother. "You'll bring her back for Christmas?"

His mother has left her seat as well and circles around to stand behind him, long-fingered hand on his shoulder. "Of course he will. Goodbye, Draco. Hermione."

"Mother," he says, smiling at her, relieved to see her smiling back. "Aunt Bella."

Hermione reaches up to embrace her mother. "I'll be back for Christmas," she promises, soft and sweet and nothing, nothing, like the strident girl he knows. "Aunt Cissa."

His mother smiles at her, presses a kiss to his hair and hers, then shows them to the door before her sister can approach. His father scrutinizes them carefully, nods approvingly at something only he can see, and then they're stepping into the fireplace in his father's study.

And tumbling out of the fireplace in their shared room in Hogwarts, Hermione holding on to him. He helps her onto the couch, then declares himself exhausted and drops beside her.

"How are my pa... the Grangers?"

"Potter told me they're fine. Shaken, yes, but recovering. There weren't any serious physical injuries." Nearly none, and he does not know what she sacrificed, what small soul-sapping compromises she negotiated to keep them that way, these Muggles she won't even call parents anymore.

"That's good," she says, voice tired, and Hermione's supposed to be the Mudblood he detests, the know-it-all he taunts, the girl he half-grudgingly co-operates with, not this crumpled child he wants to protect, not his friend, not his blood. "Draco..."

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For writing." And she looks sincerely grateful and he's going to snap.

"Please, Hermione, don't."

"No. It helped. They locked the Grangers away, and I was so lonely and she kept telling me that I should love her and your letters," she straightens and looks far more like the Hermione who left these rooms five weeks ago, "were the only things keeping me sane. So thank you." He nods. "When you write to Aunt Cissa, please thank her for me, for making us correspond."

"You needn't call her that, you know," he smiles. "Not anymore."

"I do," she answers, and he can see that she's had the same realization he has. "And I don't mind. She was... kind to me."

Ah. "Doubtless she was," he drawls. "Hermione..."

"I know. Draco," and she's crying, Merlin, she's trying not to, but she is, "would you please tell my friends that I'm back." He told Potter to be in his rooms by 5:30 before he left.

"Of course."

"Thank you." She's shifted closer to him till her hair is draped over his shoulder. "Draco..." and the hitch in her voice has grown steadily more pronounced in the last few minutes, "I... would you..."

It's 5:27 and she's crying in earnest, face pressed to his neck, and he has no idea what to do, so he does what he wanted to do for his mother, those nightmarish months when his father was gone, and pulls her closer till she's draped half-across him and cups her head and twists an arm round her waist.

And stiffens, when the door opens and Potter comes in, followed by Weasley, expecting her to leave him, look embarrassed, turn to them, but she doesn't move at all, and Potter comes closer and finally sits on the couch and runs a hesitant hand down her back, and she half-turns, hugs Potter without letting go of him, so that they're all entangled in a three-way embrace, while Weasley stands watching, stiff and awkward and easily-forgotten.