

# Dangerous Game

*by amarybeth*

Ron is dead, and Hermione finds her peace down violent and altogether unexpected avenues.

## Beautiful Traitor

*Chapter 1 of 2*

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Narcissa Malfoy truly was a beautiful woman. Hers was an icy, regal beauty, so perfect as to seem artificial, but absolutely authentic. Only a woman as beautiful as Narcissa Malfoy could look so lovely in the throes of the Cruciatus.

Antonin Dolohov smiled down at her as she writhed, basking in the warmth of his master's approval, reveling in rewards of his careful work, and most deliciously, savoring the sight of an aching beautiful Malfoy brought low.

She screamed less than he would have liked. Bella had shown no such restraint.

After a small eternity, the assault ceased. Narcissa curled in on herself, pulling her knees to her, keening softly as she struggled to regain her composure. As soon as she was able to find her voice, she spoke in a tremulous whisper.

"What have I done to offend, my lord? Whatever it is, I..."

The Dark Lord raised his wand in threat as a man might do with the back of his hand and Narcissa cowered satisfyingly, wincing as she turned her head away.

"... I beg your forgiveness," she sobbed to the floor.

"Do not, Narcissa, force me to the usual theatrics," the Dark Lord barked. "I will ask you once more. Why does Dolohov tell me that he saw you and your sister in such an unlikely place as Spinner's End earlier this evening?"

Narcissa's eyes snapped to Bellatrix Lestrange, who stood pale and remorseful in the corner. She looked back at Narcissa and anger twisted her somber expression.

"I was... We were," Narcissa began, eyes still locked on Bellatrix.

"You will look at me when you speak," the Dark Lord hissed. Both women gave him their eyes instantly. "Bellatrix can be of little help to you in any case. She has received her due discipline without being allowed to confess. I wish to hear this confession from your own lips, as you are undoubtedly the architect and she the victim of this insubordination." He twitched his white wand threateningly in his fingers. "And besides, I dislike punishing Bella."

Narcissa's eyes flickered warily to the wand in his hands.

"Severus is a trusted friend of Lucius'," she began. "And I wanted his council... regarding my son. The task you have given him, it... we are honored... but he is only a boy. I hoped Severus might, offer advice or even help, just help him, somehow... help keep him safe." Her aristocratic tones cracked on that final word.

The Dark Lord turned from the trembling Narcissa to gaze at her dark sister, his eyes narrowing with fury. "Bella," he said softly; his voice full of danger.

Bellatrix didn't even attempt to occlude when the Dark Lord entered her mind.

Voldemort found the memory in seconds... Narcissa pleading with Severus Snape to save her son, dropping to her knees before him and clutching his hand in her own, gazing up at him in desperation and obedience.

The ice-cold sensation of fear pierced the Dark Lord's chest at the sight, and he withdrew rapidly from Bellatrix's mind, leaving her swaying. Bellatrix crumpled to the floor as he reeled away from her, his frenzied movements leading him rapidly to her sister. He stooped to grasp Narcissa's perfect jaw in his white hand. He was too shaken to perform the spell wordlessly and his voice sounded almost hysterical as he hissed, "Legilimens" and entered Narcissa Malfoy's mind.

He watched in horror as Bellatrix, his most fiercely loyal servant, cast the spell to bind Narcissa Malfoy, the sole provider of his extensive and necessary material resources, to Severus Snape.

Snape.

*Villain*, he thought wildly. *Usurper*. His hands began to shake. *Traitor*. He clenched his jaw, trying not to snarl and scream.

He was his most dangerous spy, his most precious and precarious ally. No one else knew so much, no one else had such power, and no one else was so maddeningly enigmatic. The Dark Lord was a brilliant manipulator effortlessly weaving the desires and fears of his followers and victims into a straight jacket of control. But Severus Snape had, for many years now, appeared to have none to tangle. The power hungry, wounded, rejected and unloved little boy, grasping at the strands of affection and belonging so hopelessly, had long since disappeared. And the dark man who remained was something of a mystery, and also, the Dark Lord thought with a sickening lurch of terror, a boon that he simply could not carry on without. For now...

Voldemort pulled from the vision and stood, turning away from the beautiful sisters.

He wanted to kill the stupid Malfoy bitch and then open Snape's throat over her husband's Persian carpet. He allowed the fantasy to placate him for a long moment.

Taking a calming breath, he began to think rationally. Bellatrix was still his loyal servant. He could feel her remorse and her devotion as he read her thoughts. That she acted as Binder for the Unbreakable Vow... that was an act of idiocy no doubt fueled by her endless rivalry with Snape. Bellatrix may have been his favorite, the Dark Lord thought, but she too knew the influence Snape had, and it drove her mad. She must never have believed he would take the vow. The shocked look on her face as she cast the spell said that she didn't believe it even as the third circle of flame entwined the wrists of Snape and Narcissa, and then it was too late.

Narcissa, he could see, was purely motivated by foolish motherly affection. She would, as she had said to Bella in the memory, 'do anything' to protect Draco. He would have Dolohov continue to tail her, and now she would know it. That threat would be neutralized.

As for Snape there was nothing for it. He needed him in position to kill Dumbledore when Draco inevitably failed, needed him to continue to spy until that time, would need him afterwards to take over the school and begin the cleansing process. So, until some future time, what was the old adage? *Keep your enemies closer*.

He had no other choice. Voldemort clenched his fists and silently swore the moment Snape outlived his usefulness, his hubris would be answered for.

Focusing on the elaborate carvings etched into the marble of the wall before him, the Dark Lord finally spoke, "Dolohov, you have done admirably. Leave us now."

Dolohov bowed deeply before slipping quietly from the room, a satisfied smile on his face. The Dark Lord schooled his features into controlled anger and slowly turned to face the Black sisters.

"You have both disobeyed me tonight. Some might call it betrayal."

"No, my lord, please! I would never..." Bella screamed.

"Silence, Bellatrix!" he snapped. "You will learn to control yourself with regard to Severus Snape. Your insistence on his treachery led you to actions of unprecedented recklessness this evening. You will leave us now and you will not speak of tonight's events to anyone."

Bellatrix nodded vigorously as she rose. She held his gaze as she escaped, mouthing a heartfelt "Forgive me" as she went.

The Dark Lord turned back to look at the small, dark shape that was Narcissa Malfoy. She hadn't moved and appeared drained, exhausted. Judging from all that he'd seen, she'd spent the majority of her evening prostrating herself in tears. She must have a headache, he thought without sympathy.

"Narcissa, look at me."

Blue eyes met red reptilian slits.

He bent forward slightly before he spoke. "One must have hope in these difficult times." He said it softly and with a convincing look of concern. Narcissa blinked, confused.

"I, for instance, hope that in the new world that we are building the name Malfoy will still grace these halls." His eyes roamed up and around the beautiful room briefly before coming to rest once again on Narcissa's face.

"I hope that Draco will continue to be, as you said, honored by the task to which he has been appointed and that he will continue to apply himself to its completion. I hope that you understand that the moment you speak of the Vow that you made with Severus Snape tonight to your son or to anyone else, I will kill Draco." Narcissa made a choked noise. "I hope that you comprehend my magnanimity in allowing you to live after this transgression."

He smiled cruelly and leaned even further towards her, now speaking in an icy whisper that grazed the skin of her forehead.

"And finally, I hope that you are able to remove yourself from my presence... before I change my mind."

As soon as the door closed behind her the Dark Lord cast a silencing ward on the room. Picking up a crystal statue from the ornately carved desk he flung it against the marble, drowning the explosion of shards in a bloodcurdling scream of rage.

# Insomnia

## Chapter 2 of 2

Ron is dead, and Hermione finds her peace down violent and altogether unexpected avenues. Warning: Spoiler Alert, Violence, and Unsavory Sexual Situations, AU but canon-minded.

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"Harry! Harry, wake up! Harry... HARRY!"

Harry flew upright in his bed with a shout, hand flying to his fiercely burning scar, ears ringing with the sound of breaking crystal and high, rasping screams.

"Hermione. We need to see Dumbledore. We need to see Dumbledore right now!" Stars exploded in his vision.

"What happened? What is it?"

"No time. We have to talk to Dumbledore... there's no time."

With that Harry suddenly shoved her back, leaned over the bed, and threw up.

"Oh, god. I'll get him. It's okay. We'll see Professor Dumbledore."

Less than thirty minutes later, the Headmaster arrived alone at number twelve Grimmauld Place.

Hermione heard his quiet entrance from the kitchen doorway where she stood, staring at Harry. He was seated in a chair pulled up close to the stove, a steaming mug of something at his foot and his head between his hands. Mrs. Weasley was bustling about, inventing things to do all over the kitchen, though there appeared to be little requiring her attention.

"Professor Dumbledore, Harry's in here. He won't tell us what he saw," Hermione said, setting her jaw and dropping her shoulders, physically manifesting her extreme effort to calm herself.

"Thank you, Miss Granger" he said as he approached and then moved past her, stepping into the kitchen and softly closing the wooden door behind him.

Hermione understood herself to be kindly dismissed and moved from the doorway to sit next to a shivering Ginny on the stairs. She provided her companion no comfort as she might have done even three months before. In fact, the only thought that went through her head as she covertly glanced at her twitching companion was *Please, god, don't let her start crying.*

Professor Dumbledore had only been with Harry for a moment when Mrs. Weasley emerged from the kitchen through the swinging door, looking anxious. She said nothing to the young women on the steps – there was nothing much to say – and settled for joining them with wringing hands.

Several silent minutes passed.

Hermione was leaning forward and sideways with the effort to eavesdrop, pressing her head against the thick ebony banister to her right as she attempted to get closer to the closed door, when she felt it. Her compulsive curiosity caused her to be the only one to feel the Headmaster's simple ward flare to life for just a moment before flickering out again like a candle. She barely had time to glance at her stair partners and register that they had not noticed when the swinging door slowly opened.

The Headmaster stepped into the foyer and twinkled for a moment at the undoubtedly humorous picture the three women presented, huddled up like mice on the stairs. He spoke in a hushed voice so as not to disturb the infamous hallway portrait. "Harry has had a disturbing nightmare, but he's now feeling better and asking to return to bed. He's very tired after the ordeal. I would ask that you all defer your extensive questioning until tomorrow so that he might have a chance to rest." He smiled faintly.

Ginny and Mrs. Weasley stood quickly and silently to retrieve Harry from his chair by the stove. Hermione also rose and stepped towards the kitchen but only to glance at Harry long enough to note that he was dazed and disoriented, and apparently falling asleep on his feet.

Her eyes flicked back to the Headmaster, a question on the tip of her tongue.

"Professor," Hermione began.

"Goodnight, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore softly. He gave her a significant moment's glance over his half moon spectacles before turning and silently disappearing into the black depths of the hallway.

Hermione stood in the dark for a few moments. She couldn't have explained how she knew it or why, but she was sure that Dumbledore had just acknowledged that something was amiss and in the same instance instructed her beyond a shadow of a doubt to keep absolutely silent.

He needn't have bothered. *Who would I tell?* Hermione wondered as she made her way up the creaky stairs and into the room next to Harry's. Locking the door behind her, she crossed the floor and sat gingerly on the midnight blue velvet armchair. Picking up the book she'd dropped earlier at the sound of Harry's screaming, she opened it on her knee and resumed staring out the window into the black night.

She remained that way for many hours, mentally re-examining the events of the evening. When dawn broke across the navy sky, she had long since abandoned the analysis of two disturbing conclusions: first, that was no nightmare; and second, after his meeting with Professor Dumbledore, Harry had worn the unmistakable, bewildered look of a victim of a mild Obliviate.

As the sky became the sickly green gray that indicated morning, Hermione pulled herself slowly out of her chair. She moved with deliberation as she dressed, her exhausted body feeling as though it were submerged in some viscous substance.

She wandered down to the kitchen and made the strongest coffee she could, staring at her hands all the while as she leaned against the kitchen counter and listened to her little Muggle coffee machine bubble. Taking a mug and the whole pot with her, she made her way to the small household library and shut the door with no intention of emerging for the rest of the day, not even to ask Harry about his 'nightmare'. She was already convinced that when he woke, Harry would remember very little of the ordeal.

The remaining days of August passed much like that one until finally the first of September arrived. Standing before the neatly made bed and next to her precisely packed trunk, Hermione resigned herself to reaching for the final item, hidden away in a drawer of the side table. She'd put it there two months earlier, unable to look at it, unable to acknowledge its existence, and she hadn't touched it since.

With trembling fingers, Hermione slowly extracted the heavy frame, pausing for a moment to look at the red leather backing, before carefully turning it over in her hands.

She looked down at her own face. She and Ron and Harry had been on the Quidditch grounds and it had been snowing. It had been the beginning of their third year and they had been laughing and waving, laughing and waving, laughing and waving.

Hermione expected to cry, wanted to even. But tears didn't come, even when she looked very carefully at the odd lopsidedness of Ron's grin. Her eyes drifted away from him and over her own image coming to rest on the boy at her other side. His messy black hair, his laughing green eyes...

She heard the glass covering crack as the frame collided with the wall before thudding to the ground. Disappointing. She would have liked it to watch it shatter. She stood staring at it where it lay for a long time until Mrs. Weasley's voice echoed up the stairs from the first floor landing.

"Hermione?"