

Looking and Seeing

by Fawkes_07

A Non-HBP, Non-DH, AU DM/HG fanfic.
(Acronyms: The Next Parseltongue.)

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1. Prologue

Chapter 1 of 22

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Prologue

excerpts of interviews from the staff of the Potter Library in Godric's Hollow

Historians conclude that Harry Potter became mentally unbalanced after his fifth year at Hogwarts. Not because of the claims in the *Daily Prophet*; any decent historian knows better than to cite "facts" from that rag. No, it was obvious in hindsight that Potter became pathologically obsessed after his godfather's death, and upon learning the nature of the Prophecy.

They would argue whether Riddle's nightly Legilimetic intrusions on Potter's dreams had weakened him, or if the true culprit was the brief period in which Riddle took possession of Potter's body. Each faction presents their own arguments in support of their position, and both acknowledge that the sudden death of Sirius Black *and* the revelation of his ordained role as the conqueror or victim of "Lord Voldemort" would push almost any wizard over the edge.

Potter set out within a week of the events at the Ministry of Magic, burning with vengeance as though to wipe out the Death Eaters and their Dark Lord singlehandedly. He tracked Riddle back to his estate in Little Hangleton where he strong-armed his way past countless Dementors and cornered his nemesis in a drawing room. Only then did he and Ron Weasley exchange wands, that Potter could confront Riddle without the interference of the *Priori Incantatem* effect. In Weasley's own words, "He struck [Riddle] down with the *Kedavra* curse before the old [expletive deleted] could get his [wand] up." But as he stood over the body, wondering aloud how it could possibly have been that easy to dispatch such a powerful wizard, "he suddenly just crumpled and fell to his knees. I didn't know what to think at first, and then I saw the blade poking out of his chest. Talk about [expletives deleted]!"

Weasley maintained for years that he had acted immediately to remove Potter from the mansion to safety, but eventually admitted that this was, in fact, accomplished by their companion, Hermione Granger. The two wizards had struck out on this "final" quest without her, driven by the patronizing notion that, as a female, she somehow

stood a greater risk of severe injury or battle fatigue. Fortunately for them, Granger had anticipated this sort of behavior and had placed a modified Protean charm on one of Potter's prized possessions, an enchanted map made by his father and godfather, among others. When she discovered they had left Order Headquarters without her, she promptly followed via a self-made Portkey, and snatched both wizards back to safety.

Potter was forced to convalesce in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies for over a month, so severe were his injuries. Granger and Weasley both insisted that none other than Riddle himself had thrust the sword into Potter's back. "He was laying right there on the floor, and he was standing behind Harry. And only the one on the floor was dead," Weasley wrote in a letter to his brother Charlie. This was yet another turning point in the Great War: the confirmation that Riddle had accomplished the heretofore unknown feat of creating multiple Horcruxes to assure his own immortality.

Granger, being the more intellectual of the three, undertook the challenge of identifying the Horcruxes with Hogwarts' headmaster, Professor Albus Dumbledore. The Headmaster had already identified Riddle's personal diary as a Horcrux and suspected the existence of others. They kept their investigations completely out of the public eye, not wanting to alert Riddle that they had sussed out his weakness.

For six months, while Dumbledore performed the traditional sort of detective work (interviewing Riddle's earlier contacts and tracking down suspicious artifacts), Granger "practically moved into the Restricted Section of the library" and researched the properties of souls. She ultimately developed the spell to locate and reveal Horcruxes and other items containing trapped souls (which remains classified on file with the Department of Mysteries to this day). Thus were all the remaining Horcruxes discovered and destroyed, with Riddle none the wiser that his latest body would be his last.

The events of the final battle have been well-documented. Once again Granger was deliberately left behind "for her safety" as Potter and Weasley tracked down and killed Riddle. They returned to London late that spring in a gruesomely spectacular fashion, bearing Riddle's head in a type of Muggle purse known as a "bowling ball bag." Despite the display of unhealthy, bizarre bloodlust, the young wizards were well received by throngs of sorcerers delighted to see the end of "Lord Voldemort's" reign.

Overnight, Potter and Weasley became international celebrities, the darlings of young and old, rich and poor. Granger's role, though absolutely vital to their success, had neither the glamor nor the "sound bite" quality of the wizards' escapades. Her contributions remained largely unappreciated, though both Potter and Weasley, to their credit, acknowledged her at every appearance, even decades later.

Granger, however, shunned the limelight in which her two companions basked, rarely appearing at any but the most formal functions. Despite repeatedly proving herself a witch of formidable skills, she stepped out of the public circuit completely that autumn, to return to Hogwarts School for her seventh year. Some biographers proclaim this choice to be her downfall...

*** August 14, 1997 ***

Draco was awake when the morning owls arrived, though he lay in bed staring at a spider building her web in the corner of his four-poster. Once school started, he'd have to contend with the "rise and shine" routine; he intended to loaf as much as possible while he still could.

Mother's chirps over the mail echoed up the stairwell. Something good must have come today. *About time, too*, he thought testily; the recent spate of bills, hate mail, and subpoenas was making her impossibly grouchy. He still had two weeks of her shite to deal with before school started. Draco stretched, arching up from the mattress and slowly bringing his wrists out to the sides and over his head, then flopped contentedly into the down mattress. Maybe she'd be in a good enough mood that he could talk her into visiting the Parkinsons.

"Draco! Are you up, dear? You have some post!" He launched from the bed and tugged on his bathrobe. *Damn it, she better not have opened my mail again.* He really hated it when she did that, and the tone of her voice strongly suggested that she already knew what was in the envelope. But when he rounded the bend in the stairs, she was holding out a sealed envelope from Hogwarts in one hand, and a separate letter on the same parchment in the other. "Open it, open it!" she bubbled like a schoolgirl in her excitement.

Dear Mister Malfoy,

I am pleased to offer you the opportunity to serve as Head Boy at Hogwarts School for the coming year. The faculty believes you possess the sort of intelligence, leadership, and magical prowess that befits the Head Boy. If you are willing to accept the responsibility of this position, please respond to this invitation by return owl.

Warmly,

Albus Dumbledore

"Is it...?" his mother pleaded, displaying her crossed fingers. Apparently her letter only hinted at the contents of his.

Draco straightened proudly to his full height, despite being dressed only in terrycloth. "Head Boy, Mum," he said jauntily, turning the letter around so she could see.

Narcissa squealed, clapping, then gave him an airy kiss. "Wonderful! Wonderful! Answer them at once! Oh, Draco, you've done so well, this is *just* what this family needed right now. Head Boy at Hogwarts! I'll send out announcements; we can have a party tomorrow night." Her eyes were gleaming, already unfocused as she planned the guest list. People had been declining her invitations since Father landed in Azkaban, but none of her "friends" would resist *this* event.

Draco smiled as necessary and excused himself to use the bathroom and dress, taking the letter and the owl with him to write his reply. Once in his room, he scowled and nearly crumpled the parchment. *Leave it to Mother to grab hold of this and turn it into HER big break.* But what the hell, a party sounded just fine. She'd probably make some of those cheese puffs that he really liked, and he and Pansy could sneak off for some action in the west garden once night fell. Sitting at his oak desk and taking out his finest quill, Draco wrote that he was honored to accept the invitation and sent the little owl back to Hogwarts.

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Chapter 2 of 22

Draco becomes acquainted with some disappointing facts.

*** August 17, 1997 ***

The party had, indeed, improved the atmosphere in Malfoy Manor. Narcissa clucked around the house for days afterward, brushing up crumbs and Vanishing the stains of discretely-spilled drinks, pretending to complain about the dreary rigors faced by the good hostess. This was a vast improvement to the shrill whiner she'd been all summer, but Draco hardly noticed. Getting laid always put him in a fine mood, and he'd managed to lure both Pansy and Brietta Zabini to the west garden. Not at the same time, unfortunately, but still, it boded well for the year ahead.

Relaxing in bed, he watched the post arrive, having opened the draperies for a bit of cool morning air. The little Hogwarts owl had returned. Draco was expecting to receive a book list, but seeing the familiar owl made him wonder if perhaps this was more news about being Head Boy. There would be a badge, he knew, and probably some information about his new dormitory--and of course, the name of the Head Girl.

As far as he could tell, it wasn't Pansy. She could keep a secret like any decent Slytherin, but there was no reason to keep such news quiet. He didn't even know who the Hufflepuff seventh-year was; he'd seen the girl at meetings but never bothered to learn her name. Those smug bastards in Gryffindor wouldn't be back; that left only the Ravenclaw girl. Come to think of it, he never learned her name either, but he could at least picture her face.

Draco decided to torture his mother just a little bit. He was curious about the letter, certainly, but nothing could possibly top the original announcement that he was to be Head Boy. Mother, he knew, wouldn't see it that way; she'd be dying to find out what the letter said. He took an exceptionally long bath in the marble tub and took his time getting dressed.

The joke was on him, however. When he reached the breakfast nook, it was laying open on a plate, along with a small note from Mother stating, "Gone shopping--muffins in oven." "Fuck!" he shouted angrily. He *really* hated it when she opened his mail. Chomping into a blueberry muffin as though tearing out its throat, he finally sat down to read the parchment.

Dear Mister Malfoy,

The faculty and staff of Hogwarts are delighted to welcome you as the next Head Boy. Your badge is enclosed, as well as a list of Prefects and the password to the Head Students' suite. Your first duty, as you may have surmised, will be to greet the new Prefects at Platform 9 3/4 and supervise the ride aboard the Hogwarts Express.

Naturally, the Head Girl will share these duties and all others for the school year. You might wish to contact Hermione Granger prior to September the first, in order to plan the Prefect schedules and organize your presentations to the group on the train.

Best wishes,

Albus Dumbledore

"FUCK!" he yelled, spraying a lumpy mist of muffin crumbs onto the parchment. *What the hell is she doing, coming back to Hogwarts? The stupid bint! She's mental!* That Granger would forego the adoring masses for another year of the likes of Flitwick and McGonagall was simply impossible. *No one* would pass up the chance to mingle with the glitterati of the wizard world--yes, the *world*, not just London or even the UK. Everyone wanted a piece of Those Three; they were being wined and dined by every socialite on the planet.

It dawned on him that if being declared Head Boy could win him two girls in one night, then he could only imagine the kind of action Potty and the Weasel were getting. Without realizing it, he clenched his fist on the remainder of the muffin, mashing it into a thick paste. The thought of that scrawny blood traitor and the Moron Who Lived getting it on with *their pick* of the richest and most beautiful witches *EVERYWHERE* was enough to burst an aneurysm. And now he'd be stuck with that, that, that annoying little yap dog... She even *looked like* a poodle with that mountain of hair, a prissy little know-it-all Mudblood. And her face would be the last thing he'd see before he turned in for bed, and the first he'd wake up to in the morning.

Draco crushed the parchment into a ball and hurled it into the fireplace, just in time to watch it bounce off his mother's nose as the flames suddenly turned emerald green.

"Oh!" she squawked. "What was... Oh, all right, I'm sorry I opened your mail," she said crossly, setting down a shopping bag from Twilfitt and Tatting's. "I just couldn't help myself, it was too--"

"It's off, Mother," he growled over her, not interested in her excuses.

"What's off?" She glanced at the paper on the floor and recognized the ivory Hogwarts parchment. "Draco! What's this?"

"Well, I hardly need to explain it to you, do I, Mother?" he snarled back, but she grabbed the crumpled paper before he could bat it into the fire. "Granger the Mudblood's been chosen as Head Girl and I'm not about to spend a year making nice with that bitch!"

Draco's jaw fell at the sound of the slap, for he hadn't even seen her swing her hand and he was too angry to feel it. Yet. After a moment the side of his face began to sting considerably, but at the time all he felt was a numb shock. His mother had never struck him before, and she hissed at him with a ferocity she normally reserved for house elves.

"Now you listen to me! You WILL be the Head Boy, and you WILL get along with Granger! You're a Malfoy, Draco--it's about time you started acting like one! Your family *needs* this. Your *father* needs this. He's rotting away in Azkaban. Winning the support of Dumbledore is going to save us, Draco. We need his influence with the Wizengamot--we can't afford all the bribes we'd need to get Lucius acquitted, not in this political climate, anyway.

"The Dark Lord's *gone*, Draco. Really gone this time. There'll be no more spoils to plunder, no more tributes, no more protection money. Just how long do you expect our wealth to last without your father earning?"

It felt like the world had screeched to a halt and started spinning the other direction. Draco was speechless, possibly for the first time in his life. "What are you saying?" he finally croaked.

Rolling her eyes, his mother stalked off with her shopping bag and began to unload it. "Merlin's codpiece, Draco, how did you get so thick? I said what I said. Much of our assets were seized by the Ministry for reparations when your father was convicted. Don't you even read the *Prophet* I buy for you every morning?"

Gulping, he refrained from admitting he usually went straight to the comics. "So we're broke?" he said, his eyes widening in disbelief as she removed yet another expensive gown from the Twilfitt bag.

The look she gave him was hauntingly familiar (hours later he would realize it was the same one Uncle Severus constantly used on Potter). "Obviously not," she sighed in disgust. "But we have nothing coming in, only going out. That can't last forever, Draco. We need your father back."

Or you might consider wearing the same thing twice now and then he thought, but kept it to himself. The cynicism must have shown on his face, though, for she narrowed her eyes and studied him as one might look over an insect to make sure it wasn't a wasp before smashing it with one's palm.

"The Goyles invited us to dinner this evening," she finally announced stiffly, handing him the shopping bag. "Just us, no other families, but it's a start. Wear the black robes with the silver trim, and find one of your father's ties. I expect more invitations before you return to school, so if you keep very tidy, we won't have to pay to have them cleaned in between. You can get away with wearing the same ones over and over, until the other guests start repeating. Be ready at six." With that she levitated the new gowns she'd bought for herself and led them in a fashionable parade to her wardrobe.

It couldn't even be Pansy's house for dinner. So much for his good mood.

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Chapter 3 of 22

The first "business" meeting goes as well as could be expected.

* * * August 24, 1997 * * *

"OmiGHOD. She *still* hasn't owled you?"

Pansy was funny when she was affronted. She had that upturned nose, and when her nostrils flared, her resemblance to a pig sniffing for truffles was uncanny. Sprawled out on her parents' porch swing, looking up at her with his head on her thigh, the illusion was practically complete.

"Snotty little bint," muttered Draco, though the irony that he'd made no effort to contact Granger never crossed his mind. He didn't really care if she made an awkward ass of herself with the new prefects. Truth be told, he didn't really care about anything except convincing Pansy that they really could get it on in her bedroom while her parents were home, using judiciously placed Silencing Spells and a good Forbidding on the door. Hogwarts was only a week away, and it was more fun to do her when there was an element of risk involved.

"Poor Drakey, you're going to have a miserable time stuck in a dormitory with her," Pansy said, stroking his hair. "She's bound to invite every hooligan in the castle to lounge around in your common room. No one who's anyone will be able to visit!"

"Oh, I won't be forced out of my own suite by her Mudblood friends, don't worry. But it'll be embarrassing to ask people over, knowing she might prance through any minute. I suppose I'll be spending a lot of time down in Slytherin."

"You're always welcome in *my* room," Pansy remarked with a sly grin.

Yeah, I know--as long as I'm buying the butterbeer and roses. He didn't mind; flowers were a small price to pay for pussy, and he liked a good butterbeer in the evenings as well. "What would I do without you, Pansy?"

Mrs. Parkinson poked her head through the front door. "Draco, dear, your mother's Flooing. She asked me to send you to home."

Merlin in an iron maiden, what's wrong now? "Forgive me, fair lady," he said as he rose from Pansy's lap, "but duty calls."

The girl smirked. "You're so full of it, Draco. Floo me in the morning, okay?"

That sounded promising; Mrs. Parkinson always played canasta on Monday, and Mr. Parkinson would be at work. Upon emerging at the Manor, however, all thoughts of future bliss were snuffed like a candle. Mother was sitting in the main parlor with The Yap Dog herself.

"Here he is now, my dear. Draco!" she called, as if it were possible NOT to notice them from fifteen feet away. She turned her head so that Granger couldn't see the evil eye she fixed upon him, conveying the straightforward message, "You screw this up and you're dead, Buster."

"Mother," he said with a curt nod. "Granger."

That dropped the temperature in the room. "Miss Granger tells me the two of you need to discuss your duties for school," Mother said with more than a hint of warning in her tone. "Why don't I go prepare some refreshments for you, while you work?" With a graciously phony smile to Granger and one that looked like it would sprout fangs at any moment for her son, Narcissa departed for the kitchen, leaving him alone in front of an open Floo *and* the bay window with the Mudblood.

After a brief staredown, the girl spoke up. "You have a lovely home. Your mother was very kind to invite me over right away when I Flooed."

He rather expected her to chirp like a shy mouse, but her voice was firm and no-nonsense. "What do you expect?" he said coolly. "You're hotter than dragon puke right now, Granger. Of course she's going to knock herself out for your every wish. Just like everybody else is."

She scowled. "It's a shame you never took a page from her book and learned how to behave politely. Even with someone you *don't like*." There was no question that the latter referred specifically to him.

Taking it in the spirit of challenge, Draco put on his best fifty-Galleon smile and, in a voice dripping with *noblesse oblige*, responded, "Why Miss Granger, I assure you, I'm a well-schooled gentleman when the occasion calls for it. In the capacity of Head Boy, you can rely on me to be impeccably polite, as befits the dignity and responsibility of the position." Flopping into the nearest armchair and losing the smile, he snarled, "But I'm not Head Boy for another week, am I?"

She stared at him in a most disconcerting way, as though he were some sort of scientific specimin that she had just dissected, and was now memorizing all the strange, disgusting parts inside. "As you say," she replied.

This would have been an excellent time for Mother to return with a tray of little sandwiches. He'd provoked her in the past; he expected a snappy comeback or at least a burst of self-righteous anger. She didn't even look hurt, just... bored. Not in a "I'm going to pretend that didn't bother me one bit" way, but in an honest-to-goodness "Oh, are you still here?" manner. Draco folded his arms over his chest, feeling a strong sense that he had done something childish and embarrassing, and furious with Granger for being there to witness it.

"Well, then, I'll be going now," she said impassively, rising from her chair.

Oh, fuck. "Wait." Mother would come apart at the seams if Granger left after less than a minute. He cleared his throat. "Dumbledore told us to plan... the schedules and things. We really ought to do that."

She didn't exactly roll her eyes, but her expression conveyed the message anyway: *That's why I'm here, genius; nice of you to catch up.* But she returned to her seat without a word and pulled a roll of parchment from her little bag.

Mother showed up with a tray of caviar, of all things. Could she be more transparent? When he brought home a girl he wanted to impress, they'd get fruit and cheese. It was all he could do to bite back a snide comment suggesting she'd never seen such food before. But he was glad he'd kept it quiet, for Granger launched into it with vigor, and he realized *again* that she and the other bigshots had been living the high life all summer. "This is very good," she said, correctly.

"Only the very best for you, Granger." *Damn it!* It had just slipped out. This whole Head Boy thing might require some practice after all.

Her jaw fell, but at least he didn't screw up again and remark about "seafood." "Is this your plan, then?" she asked quietly. "All smiles in public, and all barbs when we're alone? Because I really don't want to bother, Malfoy; it's just too much work. We can divide up the duties right now and go our separate ways for the rest of the year."

He thought about it for a moment, and it didn't sound like a trap. "That suits me," he finally growled. "You want to be in charge of writing the Prefect schedules, and I'll do the nightly patrols?" He'd been looking forward to roaming the castle at the end of the day; it was one of his favorite aspects of being a Prefect.

Apparently Granger felt the same way. She narrowed her eyes and said, "We can alternate months."

"Deal," he said, but made no effort to shake hands on it. "I'll take patrols first."

She looked displeased, but nodded. "Fine. I'll write up the September schedule before we take the train. You'll have to show all the new Prefects the patrol routes." When he nodded, she stood and gathered up her bag. "Well, then. See you at King's Cross."

It was strange, watching her leave. He made no effort to rise politely from his chair, let alone escort her to the Floo or throw in the powder for her. Such things were common courtesy and he deliberately withheld them as an expression of disdain. But she didn't react at all—not so much as an indignant huff. She simply left. He wondered if, being Muggleborn, she was truly that out of touch with the customs of wizard society. But then his gaze fell on the caviar spoon and he was reminded again that she'd been immersed in it all summer.

"So uncouth she just doesn't care about proper behavior," he murmured halfheartedly to himself, but his insides felt inexplicably twisted up.

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Chapter 4 of 22

The school year begins.

* * * September 5, 1997 * * *

"Look who's here! The (Give) Head Boy!"

Draco laughed aloud and thrust his hips suggestively. "That's you, Zabini. Where are the ladies? They're supposed to be lined up for me when I arrive!" A missile of some sort thwapped the side of his head, and he spun round to catch the culprit. Pansy was sitting not twenty feet away with a sassy smile. "Throwing spitwads at the Head Boy, Parkinson?" he purred, crossing the room to take her wrists and pull them up over her head. "Punishable offense, that is."

She bared her teeth. "Gonna put me in detention?"

It was late at night, but there were still some third- and fourth-years milling about the Slytherin common room, and (sadly) it just wasn't appropriate to continue this discussion in front of them. "Damn straight. Detention, your room, twenty minutes from now." She dropped her gaze from his eyes to the middle of his robes and leered.

"Slut," he whispered for her benefit alone, then, laughing, joined Blaise in front of the roaring fire. It was always chilly down under the lake, even at the end of summer. "How goes it in the dungeons, mate?"

"Smells better, now you're gone," Zabini said, then his face took on a more serious mien. "Though it must stink where you are, eh?"

Draco smirked. "No, you know, it's really not so bad. We had a little talk early on, set some ground rules. I hardly ever see her, actually."

Zabini flicked his eyes away in a maneuver that Draco knew well after six years of being his roommate. It conveyed a certain mixture of mischief and guilt. He was up to something. Draco lowered his voice. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said quietly. "Just a little project in the works. Believe me, if it turns out, you'll be the first to know."

This sounded most intriguing, but Blaise was a model Slytherin, and therefore would not reveal his hand too soon. Draco knew he'd get nothing more out of him for the time being and left it at that.

It was nice to settle back into the old groove, as it were, lounging before the fire and enjoying a pissing match with Blaise. He'd never admit it aloud, but living in the private suite was not as grand as he'd always imagined. There was a wonderful sense of security in the dungeons, knowing that the lake hovered protectively overhead and thick stone surrounded them on all sides. There was only one way in, one door to watch; a guy could relax with his back to the wall, certain that no one could ever come bursting through it.

The suite, however, was tucked on the third floor in the heart of the castle. They had a portrait hole, obviously, but it was double-sized like a classroom door, obviously some stupid architectural symbolism welcoming the plebians to come in for a dose of leadership if they needed it. Draco never quite felt settled in, knowing that there were people all around him, above, below. Merlin-only-knew who might be sneaking about in one of the empty classrooms just a veneer of brick (or even wood paneling!) away. It was sumptuous, certainly, and having a private bedroom *and* bath were very welcome "perqs;" he just wish he could enjoy them without feeling on his guard 24/7.

Neither he nor Granger used their common room, despite the lavish furnishings and the cheery hearth. It was designed for socializing, chairs and couches with little end tables scattered elegantly under a rotunda ceiling enchanted like the one in the Great Hall. There had been two heavy desks, one at each window, but Granger had moved hers into her bedroom within hours of arriving at Hogwarts, and he had done the same the next morning. No communal studying in *this* suite! Of course, this had made the common room even more open and comfortable, and the house elves had rearranged the furniture to fill the gaps. It was clearly meant for prefects and Quidditch captains and other elite students to gather and mingle with the Head Boy and Girl away from the madding crowd, yet it stood empty and forlorn. Draco felt an irrational impulse to order the house-elves to drape dust covers over the furniture every time he walked through it.

Granger kept herself scarce. Their rooms were well-soundproofed, and when her door was closed, he couldn't tell if she were hiding in there or if the suite was empty. That

was undoubtedly meant to be a convenience, but had obviously been devised by a Hufflepuff. Slytherins would gladly accept the annoyances of loud music, snoring, etc. in exchange for constant awareness of the presence or absence of their suite-mate. The sense of a potential ambush nagged at him constantly.

The only times he ever heard her were when she used the bathroom, which was flanked by their bedrooms. The toilet was tucked in the back behind their closets and was well soundproofed (thankfully!), but the sinks and tub occupied a large room of white marble that rang like crystal when the taps were open. He heard her bathe every night, which irritated the hell out of him at first (since it was right after he'd returned from patrol and was rather looking forward to a nice soak himself), but he'd decided that protesting her bathing time would require him to *talk* to the stupid bint, and it wasn't worth the bother. Next month she'd be on late patrol and he'd have all the privacy he wanted.

But surprisingly enough, privacy wasn't all it was cracked up to be, and Draco found after less than a week that he longed for more contact. Crabbe and Goyle had shadowed him for so long that he felt odd in their absence, as though he'd left for class without putting on any socks. And they were never anything to talk to anyway; he had Knott and Zabini for that, and of course the ladies. Pansy was smart and funny enough to hold her own at taking the piss, but he had to be careful, for if he took certain topics too far, she'd get genuinely offended and there would be no action until he'd made up for it with gifts and insincere apologies. She was high maintenance, he had to admit, but she swallowed and that made up for a lot.

Talking of which... Draco gave Pansy the briefest waggle of eyebrows, and with a yawn and stretch, she slammed her Transfiguration book and announced that she was turning in. Draco continued his conversation with Blaise for another ten minutes, until his former roommate glanced at his watch and gave Draco a crooked grin. "Think she's had time to change into her nightdress," he said.

Draco nodded. "My thoughts exactly, Mr. Zabini. I believe I'll check in with the senior Prefect."

Zabini watched him stroll to Parkinson's room and knock; a warm red glow escaped the door when he slipped through it. She'd lit the lamp with the red shade, a very good sign. "Lucky bastard," he thought, and returned to his own room to continue working on his project.

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Chapter 5 of 22

A brief foray into the Head Boy's and Girl's common room.

* * * September 9, 1997 * * *

He expected her to be hogging the bathtub as usual when he finished his patrol, but was startled to find her in front of a roaring fire in the common room. She didn't look up when he came in, and that was fine with him. No need to exchange any pointless greetings, after all. Draco went to his room and undressed, donning his bathrobe.

Rather than simply walk straight into the bathroom, however, he felt an annoying tug from his conscience. It shouldn't *matter* that this was usually her bath time; she wasn't in there, so the tub was fair game, yet it seemed somehow taboo to just take over. Draco waffled in the doorway of his room for so long that he felt foolish. "Mind if I have the bath?" he said, then grimaced. He should have told her, not asked her.

Fortunately she didn't turn around. "It's all yours."

Fuck! He knew she hadn't meant that to be insulting, but somehow it was. "You got that right," he grunted and stomped off to the bathroom.

He took a long bath, but she was still there when he came out. She hadn't even moved, as far as he could tell. *What the hell is this shite?* "Expecting a Floo, Granger? Boyfriend supposed to call?" he said, toweling his hair. She didn't answer. "I'll be damned!" he continued. "I didn't think you could sit still this long without studying something!"

"Just shut it, Malfoy," she said listlessly.

Incredible! He hadn't thought she could possibly be more annoying, and there it was. He tossed the towel onto the floor of the bathroom and flopped casually beside her on the couch. She glanced at his bare legs as he propped his feet on a pouf, which put a wry grin on his face. Settling into the cushions, he wriggled a bit, deliberately loosening the top of his robe. "It is a nice night for a fire, isn't it?"

She looked at him with a sneer of distaste, but she couldn't hide the sudden dilation of her pupils and the lingering gaze at his chest. Draco was a strikingly good-looking man, and he knew it. He waited until she looked into his face, then quirked his brows. "Something on your mind, Granger?"

"A lot," she said, but the flirtatious nature of his question had bypassed her completely. "How was Patrol?"

A bit thick, this one. No matter; Draco enjoyed challenges of all types, and he was in the mood to rattle her cage. "Docked about seventy points. Not bad for a weeknight. I think it must have been Amortentia day in Potions; I broke up six different couples groveling in the corridors." He ran his fingers through his hair, combing a few damp strands out of his eyes.

Now she's catching on. Granger narrowed her eyes and stiffened slightly. "What are you doing out here, Malfoy?" she said suspiciously.

He shrugged, doing his best to look genuinely innocent. "Just enjoying this fine fire you've built. Feels good after the bath." He arched his upper body in a catlike stretch, loosening the robe even further, then let a hand drop to his chest, his fingertips sliding beneath the terrycloth. "You might try it yourself," he noted.

Draco had planned to slide his hand southward, but her look of uncertainty was too amusing to spoil. She just couldn't decide if he was hitting on her or not. He stretched his legs, too, permitting the bottom of the robe to fall open for a brief moment, but draped it demurely back over his thigh. *That caught your eye, didn't it?* He turned toward the fire before her gaze returned to his face. It was fun to keep her guessing.

He closed his eyes and tipped his head all the way back, utterly relaxed, and let his hand settle a bit further down on his belly. He could feel her eyes roving over him, and he gave her plenty of time to check him out. At last he opened his own eyes to find her gazing at him, to be sure, but in an unfocused, general sort of way, not with any particular keenness. Still, it was a fine setup.

"See anything you want?"

She jumped and scowled at him. "Don't flatter yourself."

He was tempted to kick it up a notch, but it had been a long day and it really did feel nice to stretch out before the roaring fire, even though it wasn't a particularly cold night. "Whatever, Granger," he shrugged, and settled back cozily again. The fire crackled merrily, warming his toes. What the hell, as long as she kept her mouth shut, why not enjoy the common room for a change?

He hadn't even realized he was drifting off to sleep. All Draco knew was that one minute he was listening to the blazing fire, the next it was nearly pitch dark save for the glow of embers. He sat bolt upright, scrambling in a futile effort for his wand. He didn't generally keep it in his bathrobe. He staved off a moment of panic by reminding himself that he really was alone. Even Granger had obviously gone off to bed.

After he caught his breath again and berated himself for dropping his guard, he realized that he was covered with a blanket—one he'd never seen before.

"Fucking bitch," he muttered, apropos of nothing.

A/N: If you've read it, review it! This is my first D/H story and I'm on the prowl for feedback.

6

Chapter 6 of 22

Draco finally learns what Blaise has been working on in secret... among other things.

* * * September 21, 1997 * * *

"Dray! Perfect timing! You gotta see this!" Blaise had apparently walked out of his dormitory just as Draco had entered the Slytherin common room.

"I hope it's funny," he said, following Blaise back into the dormitory. "Granger's got the suite like a funeral parlor. She must be on the rag; she just sits around moping in the common room all the time."

Blaise shook his head in empathetically. "Can't even be bothered to keep it in her own room, eh?" Draco scoffed. "Bitch," he continued. "Well, this'll put a smile on your face. Check out this shit." He waved toward the bed, and Draco took a seat, already grinning in anticipation.

Blaise locked and warded the door, then, with a gleefully conspiratorial grin, removed several wards on his trunk and took out a stoppered glass decanter. "I've been working on this for almost a *year*," he chortled, pouring out a single drop of the potion into a cup of water. "My granddad helped. He had this Charm, see, that he used to use at Hogwarts. He said he got it from someone else, it's been handed down... Anyway, it's for spying. You recite the incantation in front of any little hole—a crack in the wall, or a keyhole—and it works like a projector, making the image in the hole big enough that you can sit back comfortably and watch it."

I knew I could count on you, Draco thought warmly. "Oh, this ought to be rich."

"Not so fast!" laughed Blaise. He began pointing his wand at the wall sconces and extinguishing the candles. "Here's the thing: There were a bunch of conditions for the Charm to work. Your room had to be darker than the room you were watching—otherwise it would backfire and *they* would see you. And there had to be a hole to look through, with a clear view. Obviously, it's not much better than putting your eye to the keyhole in the first place. So I thought I'd try to modify it... and voila!"

Blaise had been swirling the drop of potion into the cup of water as he spoke, and he tossed the contents onto the bedroom wall with a splash. Taking his wand, he *Noxed* the last candle and murmured an incantation. The wall began to wave and shimmer like a hot road on a summer day. Within a few seconds, it was transparent, affording them a view of Millicent Bulstrode hunched over her desk scribbling on parchment, as Pansy Parkinson stretched prone on her bed reading a magazine.

"MotherFUCK, man, you're a genius!" crowed Draco. They exchanged a high five and Draco put him in a headlock and gave him a noogie, just for good measure. Laughing, they both flopped onto Knott's bed and piled up pillows behind them to watch the show. "We need to send out for some crisps or something."

"Next time," said Blaise. "I haven't had a chance to see if the potion puts an end to that business of backfiring if the room is too bright. Rather tricky to set it up, and I don't want to leave it on and go round to another room. Maybe you and I can test it later. But I suspect it works all right, because this method also lets in *sound* as well, and I know for sure that only goes one way."

"We can hear them?" Draco whispered.

"Just wait," Blaise laughed. "But they don't hear us, any more than whatever normally leaks through the walls."

Draco was truly impressed. "You need to patent this, man! You'll make a fortune!"

Blaise's smile faltered slightly. "I can't. The potion's not mine—I got it from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. All I did was combine it with the incantation, with a few modifications. But I might try to sell them the spell; all the potion does by itself is make temporary holes in doors so you can sneak out without opening the thing."

Draco nodded. "Still brilliant. You're an innovator, my friend."

"Tell me about it! I feel like I've created my legacy for the wizarding world. I just wish Pansy had a prettier roommate. Millie gets a bit dull after a few seconds."

Even though the girls did nothing in particular, it was immensely fun to sit and watch them. Pansy finished her magazine and rolled onto her back. "Anything good?" asked Millie, without looking up from her parchment.

"Eh, the usual," said Pansy. "It's practically all Harry and Ron."

"Any decent photographs?"

Pansy frowned, then took up the tabloid and flipped through it again. "A couple were all right." She tore out a page and handed it to her roommate who appraised it while she rifled the pages some more.

"Not bad," murmured Millie. "A bit humdrum. The Italian magazines are always better." Pansy nodded, ripping out another page.

Draco and Blaise eyed each other in disbelief as Millie took the second page and eyed it more carefully. "Say, this one's pretty hot!"

"You can keep it," said Pansy. "You're the Ron fan, after all."

Millie scribbled on the wall over her desk with her wand to create a Sticking Charm and posted the picture. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Pansy laughed. "No, no, it's just... I like my men dark and handsome, not freckled and gangly." Millie rewarded her insolence by grabbing a small stuffed hippogriff from her own bed and sending it flying into Pansy's head, making her laugh even harder. "Oh, now, that doesn't change a thing!" she giggled.

Scoffing, Millie added a stuffed Kneazel to the assault. "What can I say? I like a man I can break in half if I ever need to," she said with a shrug.

Pansy sighed loudly and hugged the toys to her chest. "What idiots we've been, Mil. All that time they were *right here* and we never even gave them a second look. Shite! He sat right behind me in Potions."

Millie rolled her eyes as though she'd been through this argument before. "He hasn't always been hot. And what were you going to do, jump him right there under Snape's nose? You'd be Our Lady of Perpetual Detention. You just want him because for the first time ever, there's no way you could have him, Pans."

"That's not true!" she said with a pout. Draco knew that tone; it was the only warning he ever received before she ripped him a new one. Millie, however, was either too thick to notice or too ballsy to care. She simply gave Pansy a provocative glare, daring her to prove otherwise.

When her voice came out an octave lower than usual, Draco reflexively braced for impact. "Mum has tickets for the luncheon they're doing in Prague next month, and I'm going." Millie dropped her quill and gave Pansy her full attention. "It's true. We're sitting only once removed from the head table. I'm *going* to get close to Harry, and when I do, I'm going to tell him I'll give him anything he wants."

"Pans, you *have* to bring me, too."

Turning her nose up even further, Pansy gave Millie a sour look. "You don't say? Well, Mum did reserve the entire table... but she's got people to bring, too."

Millie turned so hard her chair seemed on the verge of torquing into a twisted pile of rubble. "You have a TABLE? Omighod, Pans, PLEASE! You have to let me come! You just have to! Whatever you want, it's yours. That emerald necklace I have. I'll do all your homework for the whole year. I'll Polyjuice myself and do that thing with Malfoy that you hate!"

Draco's stomach clenched into one-onehundredth of its former size.

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Oh, right! That's what got him started in the first place! No, thanks, girlfriend; you'll probably just teach him some other disgusting trick that I'll be stuck with."

Looking genuinely apologetic, Millie began to plead in earnest. "I said I was sorry about that! Blaise taught me it, you know--I thought it was just something everyone did!"

"Oh, right! Like anyone would WANT to--"

Blaise closed the viewport with a flick of his wand. "Holy fucking shit!" he said. It was just as well that the room was pitch dark; neither of them really felt like looking the other in the eye.

"I've fucked Millie Bulstrode?" Draco squeaked miserably.

"Don't go there, Dray," growled Blaise.

7

Chapter 7 of 22

Awash with self-pity, Draco decides he's entitled to a bit of reparations himself.

* * * October 3, 1997 * * *

Granger launched out of her room. "What was that?"

"Nothing. My books." Draco swept his hand over them, scattered across one of the coffee tables in their common room. "Chill, Granger," he snarled.

She scoffed. "I heard a crash and wanted to make sure things were okay. That's what we're supposed to do; I don't need to 'chill.'"

He watched her spin on her heel and flounce back to her room. *Control freak*, he thought. *I can't fart without her running out to sniff it.* But he knew he was just being petty; she wasn't all that bad as "roommates" went. Mother was far worse, and besides, he really had thrown the books down. He'd been in a lousy mood all day.

The patrol schedule was turning into an enormous pain in the arse. He'd started it four days ago and it *still* wasn't finished. People were requesting all kinds of substitutions for one bullshit reason after another, and he'd made the mistake of accomodating the first few people who'd asked. Now he was stuck juggling everyone's exam schedules, Quidditch practices, Astronomy labs. He was beginning to feel like a human Sorting Hat. And on top of it all, Granger now had the nightly Patrol duty, which meant he was stuck in the common room pretty much after dinner.

Draco hadn't visited Slytherin House in nearly two weeks. He absolutely refused to have anything to do with Pansy. She'd crossed a line, she and her roommate. It still made the bile rise in his throat every time he thought about it. Polyjuice! What if he'd knocked her up? What if she'd deliberately "substituted" for Pansy *in order to get knocked up*? Draco was open-minded about sex and acknowledged that Polyjuice Potion had its uses between *consenting* partners, but this was downright predatory.

He would have reported it to his Head of House, but then he'd have to confess about Blaise's Eavesdropping Charm, and it would just get ugly. For the same reason, he couldn't confront Pansy either. Far too furious to carry on as usual, and unable to think of a suitable excuse for hexing Pansy and Bulstrode back into the Middle Ages,

Draco felt the only solution was to stay as far away from the dungeons as possible. He hung out with Blaise and Theo Knott as usual during the school day, but once evening rolled around and people began to scatter hither and yon for homework or studying, Draco generally found himself alone.

Alone in his own common room. Draco sank into the nearest couch with a sigh. This was just all fucked up. How many times over the years had he wished for a private room at Hogwarts? How many times had he wanted to host some shindig or another, like his parents did at the Manor? Now he had both a room of his own and a lovely parlor all set up for socializing--and thanks to Granger, he couldn't enjoy either of them.

Settling into the tub for his evening bath, it occurred to Draco that, since Granger was the cause of his troubles, she could conceivably be part of the solution.

* * *

Draco went to Zonko's Joke Shop in Hogsmeade the next morning and placed a special order. It took over a week to arrive, but Zonko's had finally Owled him that morning. Despite his busy schedule, he'd managed to pick it up before closing time (though he'd had to Apparate from just outside the Hogwarts gates in order to make it). Now he was soaking comfortably in the white marble tub, and he'd already prepared a glass of water with a single drop of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes' Hasty Retreat Potion. Now he only needed Granger to return from patrolling the corridors.

When the portrait hole closed with its characteristic click, he splashed the solution onto the wall behind the tub and *Voxed* all the candles. The charm didn't work the first time he tried it, but he'd paid close attention to Blaise and was confident he could cast it properly. On his fourth attempt, he rolled his wrist at the end, and to his delight, the wall began to shimmer.

She was still taking off her shoes. Draco wriggled back against the wall of the tub and stretched out his legs. *Let the entertainment begin!*

She took off her cloak and hung it neatly on a hanger, then did the same with her robes. Draco scowled. Hadn't she ever heard of house-elves? Who in their right mind hung up their own clothes at Hogwarts? He reckoned she would probably sit at her desk and study something, she being Granger, after all, but to his delight, she immediately began tugging at the knot in her tie.

"That's right, Granger," he whispered, smiling. "Time for bed."

The tie came off, and once again she smoothed it carefully and hung it from a clip in her wardrobe. But Draco didn't mind her silly affectation, for he suddenly realized that she was not only going to strip for him, she was going to do it *slowly*.

Draco had several lovers (indeed, one more than he had originally reckoned!), but all of these encounters had been under rather clandestine circumstances. Every time, the need to complete the "main act" before discovery by a parent, roommate, or passerby invariably forced him to rush through the preliminaries, and Draco, being a methodical and thorough sort, had always felt a little cheated. Not that he would trade what he *did* get (even if he could), but this was something new--something he'd been looking forward to.

She had her back to him now, standing before the open armoire unbuttoning her blouse. She stopped to pull the shirttail out of her skirt. Another button, then another, and the fabric parted to either side. She set to work on the cuffs. Draco placed his hand upon his throat without realizing it, letting it slide in teasing circles over his chest and belly as her blouse fell away.

She caught the blouse with one hand and, with a practiced motion, tossed it into a basket beside her bed. Her back still turned toward him, she reached around to unclasp her bra, a dainty white thing with no frills that nonetheless greatly intrigued him. It followed the blouse into the basket, and without further ado, the girl picked up a blue nightdress from a shelf in the wardrobe and spun round to face him.

Draco clenched his teeth onto a moan as she shook out the nightdress and dropped it in a shallow heap on the woodstove. It didn't matter that she had no idea she was being watched, and therefore had no *reason* to be self-conscious. He was utterly thrilled to watch her undress so deliberately, hurried only by the chill in her room. She took off the skirt and underpants together and stood before him, wriggling a little as she warmed her back before the stove. "Granger," he breathed, pressing the palm of his hand onto his cock, spreading and curling his fingers to cup himself from beneath.

Twisting away to retrieve her warmed nightdress, she pulled it quickly over her head and popped her hands through the gathered sleeves. Draco watched, mesmerized, as she tugged it into place, a little lopsided grin on her face as the flannel warmed her skin. He grinned as well; the nightgown was as frumpy and plain as he would have expected from Granger, yet it had its own intense appeal. Cozy, cuddly, a safe, snug place to rest his head, his hands. He wondered distantly if he could manage to summon her out to their common room while she was wearing it.

The brief pleasure of clamboring into warm pajamas now past, Granger's smile quickly faded and she climbed into bed, her enormous ginger cat glaring reproachfully as she disturbed his slumber. Draco could easily imagine the warm spot left behind by the displaced cat. It would be lovely to climb into an already-toasty bed on a chill night.

The beast waited until she settled down with her book, then stretched contentedly across her belly. It looked up and glared directly at Draco, startling him considerably, but it hardly mattered if it could see through the spell. Or so he hoped, anyway. The glowering stare unsettled him, though, and his arousal ebbed. It was just as well; getting off under water was not particularly to his liking.

Draco pulled the drain from the tub and fumbled for his towel in the darkness, still watching Granger read her book, absently stroking the soft fur of her cat. Its eyelids drooped contentedly, but its gaze never left him, suspicious, defensive. "Get used to it, kitty cat," Draco sneered in a whisper as he dried himself. "As long as I'm stuck in here, I'm going to enjoy the show."

8

Chapter 8 of 22

Draco discovers something unexpected about Granger.

*** October 15, 1997 ***

Mother of Merlin, doesn't she do anything but lay about in bed? Or study, of course Draco was becoming very annoyed with Granger. What fun was it to have a made-to-order peep hole if there was nothing interesting to watch?

Granted, he still enjoyed seeing her undress, but it was the same thing every night. Return from patrol, put on a nightdress, shove the cat out of the way, read. Full stop.

He'd begun to bring his own books into the tub, reading by carefully shielded wandlight, just to see what (if anything) would happen next. He'd sworn out loud the first time she'd *Noxed* her candle and simply rolled over.

Didn't the bint ever touch herself? Did she own a single sexy nightgown? He would have been happy if she'd sat even once at her nightstand and tried to brush that mass of brambles she had for hair. She hadn't even warmed up her pajamas again since that first night. It seemed that, like himself, Granger had nothing better to do in the evenings than lurk in her room.

Tonight she'd come home early from patrolling, before he'd even started his bath. He was quite certain she must have skipped part of her route; it was impossible to cover the whole thing so quickly. He had to abandon his Conjuring project midway, which he would surely have to start again from scratch, but damned if he was going to miss the one part of the evening where something interesting happened. Granger had already pulled off her tie by the time he had the water temperature correctly adjusted and flicked out the candle to Charm the wall.

A few minutes after settling into the warm water, Draco heard the portrait hole open, which startled him considerably. In his haste to take up his wand with sudsy hands, he managed to knock the thing right off the edge of the tub and had to lunge after it like an icebound walrus. Then there was a knock on Granger's door and he vowed to strangle her for giving out their password. But he was forced to belay that vow when the intruder entered her room: it was Professor Snape.

Draco stared, slackjawed, then put his arms behind his head and settled back against the tub. *Oh, PLEASE let him be fucking her*, he pleaded to an unspecified deity. This was going to be *priceless*.

It looked promising; Snape strode over to her bed with his robes cascading behind him. But any semblance of erotica ended then and there, for he stood before her four-poster and scowled. "I told you to come to me before it got this bad."

She gazed at him blankly, then (to Draco's utter amazement) rolled onto her side to face the wall. Snape turned a pale shade of salmon, then took out his wand and flicked it in a figure eight over the girl. She promptly rolled back towards him, entwined in the blankets like a frizzy burrito. Both of them glared at each other.

"I don't want it," she said.

"What you want is irrelevant, Miss Granger," Snape said brusquely. "You will take it because it is what you need." The girl clamped her eyes and lips shut and shook her head. Draco nearly squealed aloud with glee. Uncle Severus was going to cloud up and rain on her.

What happened next was so utterly unexpected, Draco instantly became suspicious that he was being made the butt of a joke. For Professor Snape, the most stern, demanding, and unyielding man in the castle, sighed defeatedly and sat down on Granger's bed with his shoulders slumped.

"Hermione," he said wearily, "must we go through this again? You *will* get past this. I will *help* you."

"I'm tired of fighting, Professor Snape," she said tearfully.

"How many times do you suppose I have felt the same way, young lady?"

The girl began crying in earnest, and Draco began to wonder if someone had slipped a hallucinogen in his pumpkin juice. Snape simply *did not* tolerate defiance, he *did not* show compassion, and above all, he *DID NOT* divulge *anything* personal to other human beings, much less students. The hairs on the back of Draco's neck began to prickle; perhaps the end of the world had come at last.

She rolled away and sobbed out loud for some time as Snape sat impassively on the edge of the bed, his hands in his lap. He didn't look at her, just stared plaintively at some distant point near the floor, waiting for an opportune moment. It finally arrived. Granger stopped crying and caught her breath, and Snape shifted slightly and turned toward her, raising one leg to rest along the edge of the bed. "Will you take it now?" he asked quietly.

Granger shook her head. "I told you, I'm tired, Professor. I just want it to end."

Snape shook his head as well, but in a slow, measured arc. "You are depressed, Hermione. But you can *and will* recover from this. It may not seem so in the moment, but you will. The potion *will* help. It just takes time. You promised me, when we set out on this course, that you would give it time. Do you mean to go back on your word?"

She appeared extraordinarily ashamed for such a minor offense. "I don't... I don't mean to. I know I promised to try. It's just... I miss them so much!" The sobs began anew. Snape looked acutely uncomfortable, but had nowhere to run at that point. He put his hand over one of hers in an almost laughably timid way and patted it awkwardly.

When she slowed down again, he tried a new tack. "Have they rescinded their invitation for you to join them anytime?" Snape said with a faint spark of his usual sarcasm. It seemed to snap the girl back toward reality; she sat up and fumbled on the nightstand for a hanky.

"No, no," she admitted. "I know I can go visit. It's just... this is where they belong. Here! They've always been here with me, they're my best friends. It just feels all wrong without them!"

"It feels wrong, Hermione, because you are depressed. Once this has been properly healed, it may still seem sad, but it will not consume your will to live."

Will to live? Draco sat up straight. Granger was thinking about doing herself in?

"But it's not just that!" she protested. "I don't... I feel like I don't even know them anymore. When I went to that benefit in Tokyo, they were like total strangers! They've become, well, *playboys* is the best word to describe it! All they think of anymore is parties. Do you know they have a fellow in their entourage whose job is to go out in the crowd and proposition girls on their behalf?"

"I fucking KNEW it," hissed Draco, smacking the surface of the water with his fists.

Granger continued, her puffy eyes wide with revulsion. "He has a list of what to look for, what they like, you know, for each of them, and he *makes sure* each of the girls he finds is willing to do... well, whatever is asked of them. Then he gives them an amulet so they can go backstage after the lecture and mingle with all the impressarios, and Harry and Ron can *pick through them* and decide whom to take back to the inn!"

Draco couldn't tell if Snape was trying desperately to suppress a smile, or if this was what a genuine grin looked like when it managed to wrest its way to the surface of his face. "I will concede that this sounds quite uncharacteristic of the awkward boys you grew up with, but I believe this is par for the course of sudden celebrity. The world is only too happy to indulge its beloved saviors; you can hardly fault them for accepting what is offered, or indeed for becoming choosy. If it's any comfort, these encounters undoubtedly mean far more to the, ahem, young ladies involved, than they do to your friends."

"That's my point!" she said. "Harry and Ron aren't like that!"

"Harry and Ron are no longer boys, Hermione. Frequent and meaningless sex with absolutely no repercussions are the stuff of fantasy for young men their age."

"Stop it! They're not that shallow!"

"I believe Lavender Brown would make claims to the contrary," Snape purred in his silkiest voice.

Granger opened and closed her mouth several times before replying, her eyes downcast. "All right, Ron's been willing to... settle for that in the past, but Harry--"

"Has struggled with loneliness and rejection his entire life," interrupted Snape somewhat curtly. "I'm quite sure he's currently reveling in this parade of hero-worship. Whether he will eventually crave something truly intimate or harden off into an incurable cynic, remains to be seen. Either way, you might consider that in Potter's heart, you will never be lumped in with these cheap encounters. You may very well end up his defining standard for all that is good and real about femininity, for you are surely the only decent girl with whom he has truly connected."

"You really think so?" she sniffled in a reverent whisper.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Do the math for yourself, Hermione. And consider this while you're at it: How do you suppose Harry Potter would cope if you took your own life?"

Fucking Merlin's balls on a platter! How does he just SAY this shite? Draco leaned in so close he smacked his forehead on the marble tiles.

Granger sat straighter, pulling herself up with an inner strength. "He didn't handle things very well when he lost poor Sirius," she finally squeaked.

Snape, sensing that the tide had turned, was slowly withdrawing into his normal inaccessibility, but his voice was still uncharacteristically gentle. "My point precisely. Will you take your potion now?"

The girl nodded, and Snape pulled out a flask from his robes, unscrewed the top, and handed it to her. She drank the whole contents at once, made a wry face, and gave the flask back. "Good girl. I trust you will report to my office for tomorrow's dose, and I will not have to seek you out?"

"I'll be there," she slurred; whatever he'd given her, it was obviously part Calming Draught.

"As will I, Miss Granger." He rose smartly from the bed and departed without another word.

Draco leaned back at last in the tub, realizing that the water had become rather chilly. He turned on the hot tap for a moment and closed the window in the wall. It didn't make any sense. She was just as hot a commodity as the two chumps, SHE chose to put it all aside and return to Hogwarts, and now she was miserable? "All she has to do is step into bloody Hogsmeade and they'll mob her in the streets," he thought ruefully.

Unfortunately, that didn't ring true. He understood. She didn't want a sea of strangers proclaiming their love and appreciation. She wanted her friends back, to sit with her while they ate lunch in the Great Hall, to walk with through the corridors, or maybe to share her table at the library.

She missed the same things he did.

9

Chapter 9 of 22

Draco and his Uncle Severus have a little talk.

* * * Chapter 9: October 20, 1997 * * *

"Mr. Malfoy. A word."

Draco's insides felt an acute burst of gravity. He was certain the Potions Master had somehow seen the viewport spell, just like that damn cat. What else could Snape want with him after class? But ever a Malfoy and a Slytherin, he put on his coolest face and strolled to the front of the classroom without a trace of concern. Denial always begins *before* the accusations, after all. Draco raised his brows in polite interest and waited.

Snape peered over his shoulder as the last students filed out, then closed the door with a wordless flick of his wand. "I'm disappointed, Draco," he said, folding his arms across his chest.

I am so fucking busted. "What? Why's that?"

With a wave of his hand, Snape indicated that he should sit, while he settled stiffly onto the top of the nearest desk. "You have been given a singular honor at Hogwarts: the title of Head Boy. A position of leadership and influence. An exceptional achievement, given the political climate toward Slytherins at this time."

Draco's mouth was bone dry, but he refused to be caught gulping just yet. He nodded with as much incomprehension as he could fake, waiting for the axe to fall.

Snape glowered in silence a few seconds, then continued. "I would expect you to appreciate the opportunities this position creates." He paused again, as if expecting a response, but Draco refused to be baited. Father had taught him never to confess, only to admit, and then only if necessary.

"You are aware that the Headmaster has decreed that this shall be a year of gaiety and rejoicing?"

Okay, wasn't expecting THAT. "I remember the first day's speech, yes, sir."

"That he insists on reviving every single festive event ever celebrated in the history of Hogwarts, including a Halloween Ball, Yule Ball, Valentine Ball, bonfires at every astronomical event (even a mere partial lunar eclipse), and a Trout Fishing Tournament?" Snape looked like a bug had just flown up his nose.

"Already ordered a rod and reel, sir." *Where the hell is this going?*

"How splendid," Snape droned. "And what other initiatives have you taken to support the headmaster's policy?" When the best response Draco could manage was a fallen jaw, Snape rolled his eyes and hissed in a way he normally reserved for Hufflepuffs. "Use your head, boy!" he snapped, apparently unaware of his little play on words. "You've been granted your own common room, filled with the sorts of furnishings conducive to socializing. This is a large castle, Draco. I'm quite sure you weren't given that particular suite because there was no place else to put you!"

The light came on over Draco's blond head long before the rant had ended, but he couldn't stop gaping. Snape was ordering him to throw more parties. *It's just not possible.* His mind refused to wrap around the concept.

"Oh, shut your trap, Draco," Snape growled. "Even I can sense the prevailing winds. Dumbledore took quite a risk, bestowing the title of Head Boy on the son of a traitor. He is offering you a rare opportunity to redeem your standing, perhaps even that of your family, in wizard society. And you appear to be squandering it!"

This was at least a little more like the scheming Snape he'd known all his life, and Draco finally snapped his mouth shut, his teeth clicking audibly. "I... hadn't really thought of it," he mumbled. "It's not like the other Head Boys ever threw parties."

"It's true that Professor Umbridge discouraged them when you were a prefect, and last year was a bit of a wash, what with the great Battle of Good v. Evil surrounding the castle," Snape admitted grudgingly. "But that is no more, Draco. You are expected to support the Headmaster's policies, and right now that policy is to celebrate our redemption."

"Hmph. I don't see Granger celebrating."

Snape sat up straighter. "Miss Granger is... struggling, Draco. I remind you that she, too, is a student at this school, and as such is also your responsibility. Were you in need, I would expect her to support you."

It was politically incorrect to scoff at anything remotely Potteresque, but Draco trusted Snape. "I hope I never reach a point where I need help from *her*."

Snape leapt to his feet and grabbed the front of Draco's robes so viciously that the younger man reached for his wand reflexively and nearly fell off the back of the bench in a futile effort to retreat. "You listen to me, Draco Peverell Malfoy," Snape purred in his softest, most dangerous tone. "Such words will never cross your lips again. You are already indebted to Miss Granger and the others. Were it not for her, your father would be dead, your mother dead or enslaved, and you... I don't care to imagine the kind of fate the Dark Lord might have planned for you."

"Your father disappointed him, Draco. *Severely*. He would have considered you and your mother a pathetic reparation for that insult. I'm quite sure he would have assigned you an impossible task and then tortured you to death when you failed it. Instead here you are, living in the most luxurious suite in the castle." He finally released Draco's lapels with a small shove. "You should kneel before her every morning and swear your undying gratitude."

"Is that what you do?"

It was a testament to Draco's love for his "Uncle Severus" that he felt safe enough to mouth off under the circumstances. Snape responded in the same spirit, for he made no attempt to strangle, hex, or castrate Draco. Instead he fell silent, staring at his adversary with an utterly blank expression. Draco began to breathe hard; he'd never felt so afraid outside of Voldemort's presence.

"As of this moment, you will cease to voice your Pureblood prejudices," Snape finally began in a crisp, cold voice. "They are not only in the minority, they are an *unpopular* minority. You will, within two weeks, host a social event for the prefects in your suite. Following that, the Quidditch teams, the Herbology Club, then groups of students from each House, starting with the fourth-years. These are to be dignified affairs, and you will set a sterling example of proper conduct."

Snape set a hand upon Draco's shoulder, a grotesque mockery of an affectionate gesture. "You will invite Miss Granger to help you organize each of these events, even though she will refuse. You will *politely* ask her to assist you in setting up--tell her you'll assign it to a house-elf otherwise; that will sway her. Finally, you will stand by her as her escort during the party, ensuring that she doesn't slip off to her room, or the library. I trust I do not have to instruct you about introductions or refilling her goblet."

Draco averted his gaze. "I know how to act the gentleman's part, Uncle Severus."

"See that you do it!" the professor snapped, but he closed his eyes momentarily and continued in a kinder tone. "Miss Granger should not be brooding in her chambers. Rising to meet her need is precisely what is expected of the Head Boy. I'm *quite* certain that the headmaster will appreciate your efforts."

Snape released him, and Draco understood he was being dismissed. "Yes, sir," he said, though his voice was much scratchier than he would have liked.

10

Chapter 10 of 22

The first step on a long journey toward a conscience.

* * * Chapter 10: Later That Same Day * * *

She finally returned from patrolling the corridors. *A bit late this evening*, he mused. The water in the tub was already beginning to cool.

She tripped over the edge of the Persian rug in the center of her floor, but did not fall. When she fumbled with the knot in her tie, Draco reckoned her potion must have been a little stronger than usual. She finally pulled it loose, but had similar difficulty with the buttons. Granger eventually gave up and yanked the thing over her head half-undone. She didn't even attempt the clasp on her bra, just wriggled out of it awkwardly.

When she turned around with her nightdress, she was crying.

Draco felt the slick sharpness of guilt slicing through his chest. *I shouldn't be seeing this*. Watching her cry in front of Snape had been, well, not *amusing*, but the fact that there was another witness had given his own presence a certain validity. But now she was alone and sobbing in earnest, absolute despair. For the first time, Draco felt dirty, a sneaking spy helping himself unfairly to the private indignities of, of... of someone who deserved better.

Clutching her nightdress to her chest, she sank to her knees and curled into a little ball, pressing her forehead into the rug. Draco gnawed at his lower lip. This was really awkward. He couldn't exactly barge in on her. He'd never so much as knocked on her door before and had no excuse to do it now. She knew damn well that her room was soundproof; he couldn't claim he'd heard her crying. "And why the hell would I care if she was crying anyway?" he reminded himself.

Even if Uncle Severus hadn't just read him the riot act, Draco would not have enjoyed this scene. Contrary to popular belief, he didn't cut the tails off puppies, he didn't cast the Cruciatus at unsuspecting birds just to watch them fall out of the sky, and he didn't get off from seeing women in pain. "She's just lonely," he thought, but it didn't relieve his distress. He was lonely too, but even if he were inclined to cry, he wouldn't be so overcome as to fall to the floor half naked. She wasn't just brooding in her chambers, she was falling apart right before his very eyes. "*Rising to meet her need is precisely what's expected...*"

Draco yanked out the stopper in the drain and towed off with brusque, hurried motions. Pulling on his robe, he darted out to the common room and quickly lit a fire. They never burned as nice when forced into a rapid blaze with *Incendios*, but if you piled on plenty of kindling, eventually the fire would catch in earnest. He didn't have time to build it up from scratch.

He rapped his knuckles lightly on her door. "Granger," he called softly, knocking again. She would be trying to pull herself together and dress, so he waited patiently before knocking a third time. She opened the door a scant inch and peered out at him with a puffy eye.

"What?" she squeaked.

Of course he knew damn well that she'd been crying, but he made a deliberate show of "not noticing" her obvious distress. "I built a fire," he said. "Thought you might want to join me."

Draco had heard of "shock therapy" in the Muggle world and he reckoned he'd just seen it work. Granger let the door fall open as she stared at him, her brows knitted into a single long ridge. She opened her mouth but was obviously struggling to find words for the occasion.

Draco shrugged. "The wind, and all." There was quite a gale rattling the windows. "Seemed like a fine night for it. Come keep me company for a bit." Sensing her distrust, he added, "No barbs. Promise. It's just nicer to have someone else there."

He wasn't quite sure what he'd do if she said no, but fortunately he seemed to have stunned her into complacency. She followed him wordlessly out to the common room, where he flopped onto the divan right before the fire and patted the seat beside him. He didn't think for a minute that she'd take him up on it, and she didn't; Granger plopped into an armchair and stared at him as though he'd suddenly sprouted some extra limbs.

Can't resist a mystery, can you, Granger? he thought smugly, giving her a sly smile.

The fire, being mostly magical, was not crackling and popping yet. "So I've been thinking," Draco began after a moment, then paused. Granger only eyed him suspiciously, even though he'd left himself wide open for a snide remark. *She really IS upset.* "Dumbledore's declared this the Year of the Party. It's time we started showing our support for the headmaster's policies."

Her glare turned into a frank scowl. "You want to turn the suite into Slytherin North."

"Technically, that would be northeast," he said. "But no, actually, I thought we'd start with the prefects. All of them."

"You want to have a meeting?"

Temper, temper. "No. A party. Something fun. Maybe just before the Halloween Ball. That'd be a good way to start the evening--a formal dinner up here, maybe some wine--"

"Wine! These are fifth years we're talking about!" she interrupted.

"Easy! Down, girl!" He smiled impishly, keeping it playful. "Just a glass with dinner, right up front as though it's the most natural thing in the world. It's good--shows them they've earned the right to play with the grownups. And they're far less likely to run around slurping spiked punch if they've already got bragging rights to the good stuff."

She looked dubious, but thought it over for a moment. "I suppose they're of an age when they should be learning their etiquette," she finally conceded. "I wish I'd had a chance to learn it before this past summer..."

"You were quite proper that time you came to the Manor." Sometimes truth was the best option.

Granger rolled her eyes. "I'd had the crash course by then," she sighed.

"Then it's settled. While we're on the subject, you and I are expected to start off the dancing at the ball. So we get to pick the first song. Any requests?"

"I'm not going to the ball," she said.

Draco snorted. "You're the Head Girl. You're going."

She shook her head, gazing listlessly at the floor. "I'm not. I'll host dinner for the prefects beforehand, but I'm not dancing. So drop it."

"Granger, you're not listening: You're the Head Girl. Everyone expects you to lead the dancing. Your absence will be noticed. Rumors will start. Pretty soon everyone's speculating whether I've tortured you or locked you away, and no one's dancing. So you're going."

"I don't have a date," she said flatly, not looking at him.

"Me either."

That piqued her curiosity a little. "I thought Pansy Parkinson was your girlfriend."

"Yeah, me too. But then I found out I was just her fuck." *Morgan le Fay, did I just say that out loud?* Granger gaped at him, and he shrugged. "Pans wants to find a good Pureblood catch," he said, trying unsuccessfully to keep the bitterness from his voice. "I'd rather keep looking for someone who actually likes me."

"Good luck with that," Granger said softly, hunching her shoulders.

Draco laughed out loud. *Walked right into that one.* "You wound me, madam."

Granger looked up again in chagrin. "I didn't mean it like that! I just meant... It's hard finding anyone who really cares."

Oh, shit, there she goes. "Eh, they're out there," he said offhandedly. "It's just another challenge."

Granger turned her whole body away to face the fire. "Challenges get old after a while."

Unsure how to respond, Draco watched the fire too. "Everything does," he finally noted softly.

* * * Chapter 11: October 29, 1997 * * *

They were just stupid little things, Draco told himself, and no one except Granger noticed them. Therefore he had no reason to be embarrassed, but he was.

He would wait in the common room in the morning to walk her down to breakfast. He left his bedroom door open when he was studying, and would tip his chin in greeting whenever she entered the suite. He even pulled aside the few Slytherin prefects he trusted and instructed them to quietly keep tabs on Granger during patrols. In particular, they were to ensure that she made her way safely down to Snape's office and back every single night--and report straight to Draco if *anything* was out of the ordinary.

I can't let her fall to pieces on my watch. Mother would go nuclear if Granger became the first Hogwarts Head Girl to take a dive from the Astronomy Tower. From that day forward, every minute his father spent in Azkaban would be *his fault* for screwing up their one opportunity to influence Dumbledore and the Wizengamot, and Mother would be sure he never forgot that. He *had* to look after her for his own sake. That was what the Head Boy did. Yeah. Just doing his job. Doing as Uncle Severus insisted.

He stopped taking his late-evening baths, however.

Homework was taking more and more time to complete as the semester progressed, and he could no longer afford the luxury of a long bath just before bed. Besides, if he started a fire in the common room hearth just after she left for patrol, it would be roaring cheerfully when she returned, and she would sit with him. It wasn't anything like watching her undress, but all in all, Draco felt it was a good trade.

She still steadfastly refused to attend the Halloween Ball. She was sure he was up to something and wouldn't be part of it. That really stunk, because she was, of course, spot on in her assessment, but confirming her suspicions would hardly change her mind. When Snape cornered him again after Potions, Draco confessed that he might have met his match.

"She reads the *Prophet*, Uncle Severus. She knows Father is on the docket for probation when the Wizengamot meets in February. She said I had no right to 'use' her for political influence."

"And you were unable to convince her of your 'sincere intent' to support the Headmaster?"

That stung. "She's known me a long time, you know," Draco snarled defensively. "It's rather like you trying to pull one over on Mum."

Snape made the slightest cringe, and a surge of vindication warmed Draco's chest. "Touche'," said the older man.

"But she's agreed to the dinner, and perhaps once she's all dressed up, I can persuade her to--" Draco stopped in mid sentence when Snape waved his hands impatiently.

"Won't work," Snape said curtly. "The girl's worse than a mule. Once she's decided something, it would take the Imperius to change her course." Draco fingered his wand thoughtfully until Snape yanked it from his hand and slammed it down on the lab bench. "Don't even think about it. No, Draco, leave this to me. I believe I have just the solution."

Draco was curled up on the divan in his pajamas, his Arithmancy text cradled in his lap, when Granger returned from patrol that night. He invited her to sit before the fire with a wave of his hand. She removed her cloak, hung it on the peg by the portrait hole, and took her usual chair. But instead of sinking into it, she sat up straight on the front edge. Her eyes were brighter than usual.

"Something on your mind, Granger?" said Draco, forcing himself to contain a wicked grin.

She wrung her hands briefly. "Well, yes. I, that is... I just thought you should know, I've changed my mind."

Draco raised his brows innocently. "Regarding?"

"The Halloween ball," she said, beginning to blush. "I'd like to go after all. Just for a brief while."

Donning his best come-hither gaze, he shoved the book from his lap. "I knew you'd come to your senses. But I won't have you hanging all over me; you get the first dance and then you'll get in line with all the other witches."

She looked so affronted that he was afraid he'd gone too far. But he laughed, and then she did as well, and for a few seconds it felt like he was with a friend.

"So what really changed your mind?" Draco said.

She hid a shy smile behind her hand. "I'm not supposed to tell. It's a secret."

He nodded slowly. "But you can tell me. I'm all about secrets." She shook her head, but he could see from the glint in her eye that she was dying to tell it. "In two days everyone will know it anyway. I can definitely keep my mouth shut that long. Spit it out!"

It had been so long since he'd seen her really smile, he'd forgotten what it looked like. Or perhaps he'd never noticed before, it was hard to tell.

Despite the fact that they were obviously alone in the suite, she leaned forward into a conspiratorial huddle. "All right," she said in a hushed voice. "I just, um, ran into Professor Snape. He said he'll be at the dance tomorrow."

She paused to glance around, as if there were any chance of being overheard. Draco was growing impatient. "That's the secret? He's a teacher; of course he'll be there to chaperone!"

She leaned even closer. "No, he's not working at the dance. He's *going* to the dance. As a *guest*. And he's bringing someone."

Once again Draco found himself on strange and unfamiliar ground. "Snape's got a date?"

Granger's eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets. "Even better. He said he's bringing *his wife*."

Draco internally chanted every single swear word he knew, and improvised a few new ones. "You're having me on," he finally croaked.

"I'm not! He said it, I swear!"

Mother of Merlin! Draco burst out laughing. "That little bastard."

Granger laughed too. "I know! I wouldn't miss this for the entire world."

12

Chapter 12 of 22

The Halloween Ball finally arrives and the evening gets off to a roller-coaster start.

* * * Chapter 12: October 31, 1997 * * *

Dinner was both elegant and excruciating. Even the act of shepherding a gaggle of tipsy prefects down the marble stairs (something Draco had anticipated with amusement for two weeks) lost its entertainment value. *Screw "fashionably late!" I've GOT to see this!* Even Mum had no idea that Snape managed to pull a bride out from under Merlin-only-knew what rock.

The Great Hall was only half full when they arrived, and the Greasy Git was nowhere to be seen. Draco finished scanning the room long before Granger, and noticed she silently mouthed the word "Shite!" when she arrived at that conclusion. Draco nodded slyly, making her hunch her shoulders with shame. "Fucking bastard," he whispered into her ear. "Probably slip in unnoticed for ten minutes and sneak back out."

Granger turned her head to reply, but startled awkwardly when she realised how close he was. She snapped back to eyes front, mumbling, "He'd better not." Draco's brows flicked up involuntarily. *A little nervous, Granger?* he thought, but said nothing.

Professor Flitwick caught his eye and glanced nervously toward the "orchestra," a cluster of enchanted instruments with bows poised over the strings. "We'd best get this started," Draco breathed even more softly into the girl's ear. "Maybe that'll flush out our quarry."

Again she avoided his eyes. "Fine, all right. You told Professor Flitwick not to go too fast, didn't you?"

"I thought you said not to go too slow," he replied, leading her through the parting crowd. When she crushed his forearm in a death grip, he smiled. "Relax! Just a joke."

"Not funny," the girl hissed.

"I'm hilarious, Granger, if you'd take the broomstick out of your backside. Come on!" Having reached the vacant dance floor, Draco gave her an expert tug and stepped smartly into place, putting her dance position before she knew what hit her. "Just let me lead. You'll be the belle of the ball and all that bullshit."

"I can hardly wait, Prince Charming," she sneered, but kept her face diplomatically neutral. *Not bad for a Gryffindor*, he thought as Flitwick raised his wand like a conductor and Charmed the orchestra into the Merry Witches Waltz.

Draco had spent many an hour in his youth learning to dance, steering his mother around the empty ballroom even though she towered over him, making it impossible to see where he was going. She had taught him tricks for handling different partners, from the shy and soggy ones who practically drooped on the floor to the willful would-be captains who constantly wrestled for the lead. He was a confident enough dancer that he didn't have to work at it; he could trust his body to handle the process.

Granger was still focusing far too much on the basics of moving her feet. To his surprise, however, he felt the potential for magic--he could sense it in his fingertips, his mouth, the root of every hair. "Don't fight it," he hummed softly.

"Be still or I can't count!" she hissed, missing a step.

"That's what I'm saying! Don't count. Just follow my lead." She glared up at him with the beginnings of a scowl. "Ah! Look to your right," he scolded.

Draco deliberately lengthened his stride to make her step more lively; having too much time to focus on the footwork only made things worse. Naturally, she stumbled a bit at first and glowered again, but he gave her his coolest smile. "Quit thinking, already, will you?"

"I don't want to look foolish!"

"You're a piece of work. Fighting the lead is exactly how to look bad! Come on, this isn't a battlefield. Trust me for two minutes, will you?" She rolled her eyes and stiffened, and the burgeoning magic withered and collapsed.

When the tune ended, Draco offered his arm like a well-bred gentleman and escorted her to their table, which was decorated with a pumpkin carved with the Hogwarts crest. She pulled out her own chair before he could reach it. "Duty's done, Malfoy," she said. "As soon as Snape shows up, I'm leaving."

"Might as well--you're the life of the party." *Aw, fuck*, he thought, too late. Now she'd be in a nasty mood when Snape finally saw her.

She shot him a withering glare. "I'm sorry my dancing's not good enough for you."

"Did I say that? No. You were too tense, and I was trying to loosen you up a little. You don't always get the magic, you know." In truth, it was rare to find a partner that could really bring it to the surface. He'd only had it work once before, with an Austrian girl at some Ministry cotillion that he'd attended with his parents. He didn't even learn her name, but he never forgot her.

Her face scrunched up like a prune. "What?"

"The dance," he said, taking the nearest chair. "Didn't you feel it?" *If you're just going to deny it, then to hell with you.*

She looked confused. "I did notice something," she admitted somewhat weakly. "I thought maybe I'd bumped into one of the ghosts. That was from the dancing?"

Draco thought she must be kidding, but there was no guile in her expression. "By the Goddess, Granger, you're such a Mu-- a Muggleborn. There's magic in dancing. The meeting of yin and yang, the rhythmic and synchronized movements, they... combine into something greater than the sum of their parts. Even Muggles can make magic if they really abandon themselves to the dance. You know how they all have rituals with drums and shit. Why do you think dancing's taboo among superstitious Muggles? They sense the magic, even if they can't understand it."

She stared in disbelief. "I've never heard any of this!"

"Should've taken Advanced Muggle Studies," he snickered. "Or dancing lessons, like I did."

She frowned thoughtfully. "I've felt something like that once before. With Harry. When he and I destroyed a Horcrux together."

Draco nearly leapt to his feet. "Fuck, Granger! That's hot!" He meant it, too; battle accelerants were the stuff of legend.

She laughed. "You're such an arse."

"Dance with me," he said, surprised at the urgency in his voice. "For real this time. I thought you were just resisting because it was *me*. I didn't know you... didn't know." He stood beside her chair, tugging her wrist as hard as he dared.

She eyed him dubiously. "Malfoy... is this some kind of weird pureblood sex thing? Because I'm not doing it if--"

"That's not it at all." *Well, not entirely.* "I told you, the magic doesn't always come; it's only certain partners that bring it out. But you'll see, it's totally worth it. Come on!"

Despite her obvious reluctance, she stood, and Draco wasted no time, practically pulling her out to the dance floor. Snapping into position immediately, he didn't even wait for a new measure to begin dancing. He could see it in her eyes: she was still trying to count. "Don't think! Follow!"

She rolled her eyes again, and he knew he'd have to talk her through it. "I have you, Granger," he breathed, pulling her closer. "You don't have to do anything. Just surrender." Her spine, tense beneath his palm, began to soften. "That's right. Move with me. Your feet know what to do, your body knows what to do." The first tingle of magic began to arc between them.

Again Draco lengthened his steps, but this time she yielded to the challenge. *Oh, yes.* This was definitely how it felt with that Austrian girl. She needed no more coaching. He could signal his intent with but a crook of a finger and she was no longer merely following, but anticipating and cooperating. Their breathing began to synchronise with each other and with the music, creating patterns within patterns of movement and sound.

Soon the magic was pooling between them, displacing the air, the robes, the flesh and bones, leaving only a single being made of fire. "Yes," he mouthed silently; though her head was turned away, she did the same. He knew instinctively that their hearts were beating in unison; they had become a living fugue of music and power.

He no longer heard the orchestra, but he felt the final crescendo build and understood its significance. Pulling her upper body close, Draco took a wide step and thrust his thigh between hers. She arched her back, and so did he, dropping her into his fingertips as she gripped his leg tightly, one ankle wrapped around his calf. Both of them gritted their teeth.

The music stopped, the magic dissipated, and Draco was standing once again in the middle of the Great Hall holding Hermione Granger in a treacherous dip, in the midst of tremendous applause. *Seven hells, we cleared the floor?* He laughed, and Granger laughed, and he pulled her up with far less grace than he would have liked, but it didn't seem to matter, they were both rosy-cheeked and giddy.

Dumbledore stepped out of the circle of onlookers, his eyes twinkling fiendishly behind his half-moon glasses. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" he said, clapping both of them on the shoulders. "The two of you cut quite a rug! Oh, to be ninety years younger," he sighed with a wistful grin, though he was gazing at Draco at the time.

"I need to sit down," said Granger breathlessly, and Draco heartily agreed. Still breathless, he made their way to the table and they both fell in their chairs, laughing. "You were right, Malfoy, that was amazing!"

"Told you. I'm more than just a pretty face, you know," he said, reaching for a glass of water. She rolled not just her eyes but her whole head, yet never stopped grinning. Draco froze with the glass halfway to his lips until she looked away. He found himself fighting an impulse to take her hand as it rested on the table.

"I can barely catch my breath!" the girl noted.

He snickered his agreement. "Pity we never went into battle together."

Her brows knitted just a bit, and she said, quite sincerely, "Oh, no. I doubt it would work if we were on opposite sides."

Father had taught him the primary rule of engagement: Never show the enemy how badly you've been wounded. Draco forced his mouth into an icy smile. "Quite so," he grated, even as his insides turned to glass and shattered into a million jagged shards.

13

Chapter 13 of 22

And because I know everyone's dying to meet Mrs. Snape...

* * * October 31, 1997 (continued) * * *

Neville Longbottom was dodging his way through the crowd to their table, and for the first time in his life, Draco was glad to see him. He rose abruptly from his chair and exited as quickly and gracefully as he could manage, saying nothing. He'd been lucky his voice hadn't cracked the first time and he knew better than to push it.

He could easily have snarled his way through the room for an immediate exit, and he would have liked to do nothing more, but there was no way he'd let the school see him come undone after what they just witnessed. The only possible conclusion they could make would be the truth: that Granger had reached into his chest and ripped his heart out. He had to keep it together until he was outside the Great Hall. He *had* to. He headed straight for the wall; at least he would only have to contend with the crowd on one side.

Within twenty feet of the door, he saw a pale, familiar face in the shadows: Snape's. *Fuck!* He had no desire to meet anyone, least of all his new "aunt," but Uncle Severus had spotted him and had that particular pinched look that meant he, too, was determined to get this over with.

There was no way out, but he could hasten the process. Abandoning all pretenses, Draco approached them and bowed directly to the petite, dark woman standing half-hidden behind the professor. "Madam Snape, I presume?" he grated as calmly as he could.

Snape's lip curled in sharp annoyance. "I see Miss Granger cannot keep her yap shut."

"How do you do?" Draco added as an afterthought, waiting to be introduced. The woman retreated a bit further behind Snape, watching him with wide, doe-like eyes. *What the fuck? Am I that scary?* He glared at his "uncle," in no mood for games.

"My wife cannot hear you, Draco," Snape said casually. "She's been cursed with the *Vox Malific*. The only voices she can hear are those of her enemies. She does not

speaking, either, for only those who mean her harm can hear her. I can't even introduce you, for only her enemies may say her true name."

Draco was only holding himself together with spit and bailing wire, and that left little room for tact. "Whoa!" he blurted. "She's really fucked, isn't she?"

A little brown hand popped up to cover a silent giggle. "She can, however, read lips," growled Snape.

Oops. Draco looked up and down between the two of them and gaped. They couldn't be more different. She was as diminutive as Snape was tall and imposing, her skin brown and weathered as his was pale. *Perhaps some kind of Pacific Islander,* Draco decided. Pretty enough, in an ordinary way, with the healthy glow of someone who spent a lot of time outdoors. "My apologies," he enunciated carefully, making her giggle again. She tugged at Snape's sleeve and he looked down to see what she wanted, beaming in a way Draco had neither seen before nor imagined possible.

"She likes you," Snape grumbled when he looked up again. The woman retreated behind Snape's back and peeked at him with one eye.

Any other student at Hogwarts would question her tastes, but Draco knew his Uncle Severus well enough to love the bitter old man, and at that moment, a little positive regard went a long way. "Perhaps my uncle will bring you by to visit later, when things aren't quite so--" He stopped abruptly, for there was a great deal of noise suddenly at the main door, and the woman's eye had gone wide and disappeared behind Snape's back.

Snape looked up in consternation and turned to pull her protectively against him. "What the devil?" There was a frank wail building up in the Entrance Hall. Seconds later, a tight crowd of students plowed into the Great Hall, seemingly plastered around none other than Harry Potter.

"Oh, fuck," groaned Draco and Snape in unison.

14

Chapter 14 of 22

Potter confesses some disturbing details, much to Draco's satisfaction.

* * * November 1, 1997 * * *

The ball was supposed to end at eleven. Dumbledore apparently had a bit too much Old Ogden's, however, and neglected to shut things down until well after midnight. Potter's presence had undoubtedly contributed to the chaos as well, though Draco had left immediately, having no stomach to face that little prick after what happened with Granger.

He spent the early hours of the evening in their common room, but did not bother to light a fire. When midnight finally rolled around, he took up his wand and systematically patrolled the entire castle, flushing out would-be lovers from every hidden nook, full-length tapestry, and dark corridor. When he reached the top of the Astronomy Tower, he simply turned around and performed the same sweep in reverse.

When he came at last to his own portrait hole, he heard them laughing in the common room.

Draco snorted in disdain, but it was really only for the principle of the thing; he'd already supposed she'd bring *him* back to the suite. *Damned if I'm going to be forced out of my own room by that tosser.* He steeled himself and gave the password.

I fucking KNEW IT! Potter was sitting in *his* spot on the divan, an obviously magical fire burning quietly in the grate, and there was Granger, parked right beside him. *I get her all worked up and you slink on in and make the moves. Arse!* "Entertaining, Granger? Beg your pardon, but I'm afraid I live here too, only one door and all."

"Malfoy! Where've you been? You disappeared from the ball!"

"Didn't like the present company, I'm sure," muttered Potter.

"Still don't!" Draco said, grinning. "But at least I'm in good company."

"Malfoy..." Granger began with a tone of warning, but Potter snapped, as usual.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Draco had been brooding for several hours, and was genuinely angry on several fronts. A legitimate target was all he needed. "Mrs. Snape heard you come in, Potter. She *heard* you. Ducked out of sight long before you came into view."

Granger looked at Potter in shock, and Potter shrank a few sizes and dropped his gaze to the floor. Draco had hit the mark, and he was only getting started.

"Harry?" said Granger tentatively.

Potter raised his hands as if warding off a volley of stones. "I know," he said to neither of them in particular.

"So what is it? Do you hate her just because she's with him? Or have you managed to Conjure up some other reason to threaten a little half-pint like her?"

"It's not like that!" Potter snapped.

Draco wasn't having any excuses. "She **HEARD** you, Potter. That only means one thing. You've taken out all your shite on Snape since the day you got here, but I swear, I'm not going to let you hurt--"

"I wouldn't!" shouted Potter, leaping to his feet. "You don't know anything, Malfoy! The curse can't... It's not that smart. It can't tell between someone who means to do harm and someone who..." Potter's argument trailed off and he sunk into the divan.

"Who what, Harry?" said Granger, undoubtedly the least grammatically-correct sentence she'd ever uttered.

"It's complicated," Potter sighed.

"Is it?" said Draco. "Then let me simplify things, Potter. You harm one hair on that little head, and I'll kill you. I don't care how many Dark Lords you've slain. Hear me?"

Draco was itching for a fight after this evening, and he fully expected Potter to offer a duel on the spot. It was with mixed feelings, therefore, that he watched Potter curl around his own middle with an expression of pure loathing and say, "I'd never hurt her. I swear it." He looked pleadingly at Granger. "You don't understand, but I swear I'm not her enemy. You saw me dance with her tonight, you believe me, don't you?"

Granger glanced between the two wizards uncertainly, and it eased Draco's anger somewhat to see that she obviously gave him some credence instead of blindly supporting Potter. "She didn't look very happy, Harry," Granger noted.

Potter ran his fingers through his hair, an annoying habit Draco had despised for years. "She wanted to show him that she trusts me. She knows I won't hurt her. Never again."

You fucking bastard. "Again?" Draco breathed.

"I told you. It's complicated."

Draco was angry enough to hex him with his bare hands, but the little prat looked so genuinely miserable that he reckoned the guilt was sufficient torture. *For the moment, anyway.* "Then leave her alone. Don't make her 'prove' any of your bullshit to Snape, or to you."

Granger shifted a good six inches back away from Potter on the divan. *Take that, motherfucker. No way in hell you'll score with Granger tonight.*

15

Chapter 15 of 22

A brief snapshot of Harry and Hermione's current relationship.

* * * November 1, 1997 (continued) * * *

Draco woke a dozen times during the night with a dull pain in his jaw from grinding his teeth. When at last he woke to sunlight streaming between the velvet draperies, he felt about as rested as if he'd spent the night boxing with a kangaroo. And to make the morning complete, he could hear a muffled male voice out in the common room.

Slept on the divan, did you? At least you didn't make it into Granger's bed. Draco wasn't particularly hungry and he *definitely* wasn't in the mood to come face-to-face with Harry Potter, so he pulled up the bedclothes and settled grumpily into his pillow.

But Draco was not in the habit of allowing himself to be trapped in his own bedroom, and quickly became bored. He always kept a carafe of water on the bedside table, not liking to wake up thirsty in the night, and he decided a bit of entertainment was in order. He Summoned the potion, mixed a drop into solution, and hurled it at the bedroom door, all without getting up.

Potter was half-reclining on the divan, his hair resembling a sheepdog's arse even more than usual. Bare shoulders poked out above the blanket--the *same white blanket* that Granger had once draped over him. Granger was in a red bathrobe he'd never seen before, sitting in the armchair. At least she wasn't in his lap this morning.

"... nothing for today or tomorrow; I thought maybe we could go Diagon Alley. Ron's in London right now. He's probably hung over from the party last night but later on I'm sure he'd love to see you."

Granger gave him an indulgent look. "I have homework, Harry. And besides, I can't just get up and leave. I'm Head Girl, I have to behave!"

Potter snorted. "Hermione, *please*. You can't fool *me*. You've read all the books to the end of term and have the homework done for the next two weeks."

"I don't either! I've spent the past week taking care of things for the party *and* the ball; I'm behind on everything!"

"Meaning you only have one week's worth of homework done in advance." He rolled his eyes. "Give it a rest! Have some fun with us."

"Not right now, Harry, okay? Maybe later. Christmas hols are coming up soon, we can plan--"

"Mother of Merlin, I refuse to plan a fun afternoon more than six weeks in advance. I swear, you'll drive me stark raving mad someday." Draco nodded in silent agreement before he remembered who was speaking.

"Hey," said Potter in a sharper tone of voice. "I know just the thing. In three weeks, Ron and I are going to America. They have this holiday coming up called Thanksgiving. All they do is lay about all day eating roast turkey and watching Quidditch. Absolutely brilliant, if you ask me. Anyway, we're opening the exhibition match between the American and European all-stars. Ron's going to throw up the Quaffle, and I'm releasing the Snitch! Viktor will be Seeking for Europe--and that's right, Fred and George are doing the pre-game show! They competed with forty other fireworks dealers for the contract, and they've promised it'll be spectacular."

"Come with us, Hermione! We'll spend the whole day stuffing ourselves silly. We've got a private box, and dinner with the teams afterward! It'll be a lark, won't it? Say you'll come!"

She was cringing as though trying to squeeze under the leather cover of the cushions. "I don't know, Harry. I mean, you know how these things are. No free lunches. When's the press conference?"

Potter mashed his lips in distaste. "Look, Ron and I will take care of all that. All the 'duty' is before the match: We ride in a parade that morning and wave at all the kiddies, then there's a meet-and-greet, and then we open the game and we're done. You don't even have to arrive until the game starts, if you want."

She eyed him suspiciously. "But dinner with the teams... That sounds like a photo op."

Potter sighed. "Strictly candid. They promised no reporters. The players don't want to work the press all through dinner, either."

Hermione folded her arms defiantly. "I don't like the sound of it, Harry. They told us the same thing in Cairo that time, and we ended up stuck at the 'dinner' for five hours. I missed the Pyramids!"

Nodding, Harry gazed glumly at the floor. "I haven't forgotten."

"Not to mention that with all those famous athletes AND the two of you, there's bound to be a line of autograph hounds waiting outside!" There was no mistaking the accusation in her tone.

"Oh, come on. That even happened *here, last night*, for heaven's sake. It's just part of the life, Herms."

She scoffed. "And will you be sending out your 'entertainment director' to pick them over?"

Potter grinned wickedly at the real source of her resistance. "Well, that depends," he purred, settling back into his pillow, "on whether you'll let me bring you up to my room that night."

Draco's fists clenched, but Granger's expression of utter scorn kept him from casting a hex right through the door. "Oh, right, Harry. Next you'll be telling me that you and Ron will be drawing straws to see who gets the privilege."

"No way! I'd never leave it up to chance like that. Besides, that bastard would probably cheat." Potter winked, sending Granger into a fit of giggles. "No, no, it would be lady's choice," he continued, shifting his shoulders so that the blanket slid down and revealed a little of his chest. "It's only fair. And not to sway your decision, but I've become a very good lover," he added, the mischief rapidly evaporating from his voice.

If it could have been heard, Draco would have made a gagging sound, but Granger beat him to the punch anyway. "Yes, yes," she clucked, "I'm quite sure you're a legend in your own mind."

"Ouch!" Potter laughed, bouncing up from the pillow and throwing it at her in a downright brotherly way. "Well, maybe so," he admitted cheerfully after she hurled it back at him. "But I really do get my share of compliments. Perhaps you could give me some unbiased marks..."

Granger's sparkling eyes suddenly turned serious. "Oh, Harry. Would you really want me to become just another fuck?" Draco bared his teeth in what was almost a smile at the echo of his own words.

Potter sat bolt upright, his mien suddenly serious. The blanket fell into an abrupt heap in his lap, revealing a large silvery scar through the left side of his chest. Draco gasped despite himself; it was obviously a terrible injury, and Potter had never revealed it to the public. There had been a scandal when a photographer had slipped into his room at St. Mungo's: Potter put the fellow under the Imperius from his hospital bed and made him destroy the film on the spot. Then he demanded the fellow be Obliviated so he couldn't draw or describe what he'd seen. *Never show your enemies how badly you're wounded.*

"Hermione, no!" Potter's voice was painfully sincere. "You're my best friend." He placed his hand over the scar. "You saved my life! You saved *everyone*. Everyone in the *world*." Granger tossed her head, but Potter took hold of her shoulders and twisted his upper body to look her in the eye. "No matter what happens, Hermione, you'd never be like those girls, to me. Ever." He pulled in his lower lip and softened his grip, sliding his hands along her upper arms. "No matter what."

The girl slumped her head with a weak, skeptical grin, but she leaned forward and gathered him into an A-frame hug. Potter's face looked utterly at peace as he rested his head on her shoulder. Draco gazed at them, spellbound, then raised his hand impatiently to flick away a tear.

16

Chapter 16 of 22

Late Night with Draco Malfoy.

* * * November 18, 1997 * * *

The castle took on a whole new atmosphere around three AM.

Draco hadn't slept well since Halloween. His damn teeth and jaw were aching all the time and, truth be told, he was a little worried he might crack a tooth one of these nights. So he prowled the corridors long after the last of the prefects had turned in for the night, even after the professor du jour (du nuit?) made their final patrol. There was no chance of catching anyone, for all were tucked in behind doors and portraits, but it felt good to keep moving.

Filch went to bed around midnight, and took that annoying cat in with him. Draco had free reign of the vast, empty castle, and silence suited him perfectly. Oh, the portraits would, if awake, mutter reprovingly as he passed, and the occasional ghost would jump or squeal as he rounded a corner unexpectedly, but these weren't people, only shades of people, and he didn't mind their presence. They enhanced the eerie strangeness that is unique to public spaces when they are empty, and Draco was in the mood to feel conspicuously alone.

"Fuck her!" he hissed into abandoned staircases when the sting of her comment would leap unbidden into his mind. *Yeah, we'd have been on opposite sides. I would've stood alongside Father and you'd have put me in Azkaban, too, or maybe my grave. Bitch!* He'd seethe and stomp through the dark, empty halls until the anger dissipated, then he'd massage the muscles of his cheeks and temples until he could loosen his jaw again.

When his mind became muzzy for lack of sleep and his legs were too tired to climb another staircase, he would head for the suite quickly. He hadn't quite perfected the art of timing it just right. If he climbed in bed too early, he'd just stare at the ceiling and grind his teeth. But if he wore himself out too far from the suite, it would take a long time to slog his way back, and once he was too tired to become angry, he would simply become miserable.

How did it get so fucked up, that I can't even see a way to unfuck it? Father was in Azkaban, Mother was shopping, and soon there would be nothing left of the Malfoy name but a mountain of debt. Draco was sick of it, of *things*, of new clothes and new furniture and all that shite that piled up and cost money and never fucking satisfied anyone. He had a dozen quilted, down blankets at the Manor that he could choose from every night, yet no one ever laid one over him gently as he slept, like Granger had.

No one would face off against a Dark Lord to pull *his* shattered body back to safety.

"Granger," he whispered in empty classrooms and alcoves, and to the frosty panes of windows overlooking the lake.

She'd built a fire the first night he'd officially taken over patrols again. He came back to the common room at the usual hour. At first he reckoned that Potter had just left, and

he stalked straight to his room without a word. But then she lit another the second night, and he realized as he walked in that she was doing this for *him*, just as he'd built fires to welcome her back to the suite when she was patrolling. *Goddamn cunt!*

On the third night, Draco stayed out until he was certain that any fire in the hearth had burned out. He went home to darkness and dying embers and found that he could almost get to sleep. Almost. A few more staircases ought to be the trick.

He was sitting on a window ledge of the North Tower, just outside of Trelawney's classroom. The bint kept that suffocating, incense-choked fire burning 24/7, but from outside, it was actually kind of handy. Between the moonlight and the dim red glow, he could make out the topography of the tower stones, and he'd decided two nights ago that he would find a way to the roof. The Astronomy Tower had a flat top and a staircase and was therefore no challenge whatsoever, but this one was a conical turret and would take effort.

He'd climbed through a French window off the uppermost corridor and climbed up to the classroom level using a bas-relief grapevine carved in the bricks for hand- and toe-holds. They stood out fairly far and were perfect to find purchase, though why anyone would bother with such ornate decorations on a virtually invisible wall was beyond him.

Draco made it this far once before, only to discover that the eaves below the roof were both smooth and deep. He needed gear to get any further. After a bit of subtle researching he conceded a tiny bit of magic and anchored a few convenient rocks to the eaves with Sticking Spells. If the crazy bug-eyed professor wasn't sleeping just on the other side of the wall, he reasoned, he would have hammered in spikes.

Traversing an overhang was not necessarily difficult, but it took careful planning. He wedged one foot behind the hunched neck of a gargoyle and placed the other on its nose, arching his back along the undersurface of the eaves to reach the first handgrip. The key was keeping close to the granite and carefully choosing which hand or foot to move. Letting go with both limbs on the left side, for example, would leave him dangling from the eaves by his right limbs like a lopsided bat. Draco was light and strong, but recovering from a "barn door" was unpleasantly taxing, and he had no harness.

He'd anchored the second rock a little further than he preferred, but it would put him in great shape to reach the roof. He released his left foot from behind the gargoyle's head and let it cantilever his body onto the diagonal as he reached with his right hand. The gargoyle's eyes glowed orange and it stretched its neck to push him forward. "Sod off!" Draco spat at the stone creature, and it retracted to its original position with a pout. He'd gone that far without magic; he wasn't about to accept a boost from a bloody *sculpture*.

He swept his left leg across the granite until he found the third stone and wedged his toes onto it securely. Now was the moment of truth, for once his foot left the nose of the gargoyle, it would probably be harder than hell to climb down. He shoved off and quickly swung that leg up behind the left in a "flagging" technique, keeping his center of gravity in the middle of his body.

By straightening the left leg, he could reach the slate tiles of the roof extending over the edge of the eaves. He slipped his fingers between two tiles and twisted them into a "jam," then took a deep breath. For the first time, he was certain he could make this climb.

Draco brought his feet onto the closest toe-holds and braced himself to reach over the edge of the roof. The tiles obviously slanted downward and their bottom edges were useless for gripping, but there were plenty of cracks between them for finger jams. Once both hands were jammed atop the roof, he hooked his heel over the edge. *Pity there aren't any rain gutters*, he thought briefly, then banished the notion. He hadn't chosen to climb the roof because it would be easy.

Tensing his thigh, he walked his hands further up the roof until at last he could pull the remaining leg up around the edge of the eaves. Though it was a cold night, he was beginning to sweat from the exertion, but he'd pulled through the overhang and the hardest part was over. There weren't many decent holds for his feet, but his fingers could wedge into cracks aplenty. He scooted up the slanting roof with the smooth confidence of a spider, to wrapped his arms and legs around the top of the cone for a stunning view of the moonlit grounds.

For a few brief moments, Draco felt at peace. Once the adrenaline from the climb wore off and the view no longer dazzled him, however, he began to realize that he was utterly alone on the not-very-comfortable top of "Trelooney's" tower, clinging to cold, unyielding stone for his life. The irony of his circumstances made him scoff, but rather than reflect upon it, Draco instead began to ponder just how the hell he was going to get down.

When he scaled the Manor as a child, he'd generally had Dobby retrieve him from the chimneys or gables, if there was simply no way to get to an attic window. When he climbed on rock faces, he developed the habit of leaving his broomstick at the base of the cliff, to Summon when he was ready to descend. Then he'd learned to Apparate and had used that technique exclusively since then. *But I can't Apparate within the grounds, can I?*

Shit.

There was nothing for it; the roof was too steep to climb down without ropes, and he'd never get back under the eaves, even if he could sweet-talk that gargoyle into helping him again. He could Conjure some ropes and take his chances that they'd be strong enough to hold him, or he could Summon his broomstick from the suite. It would break the window to get outside, but that was easily repaired. Draco tightened his grip with his left arm and pulled out his wand with the right and wordlessly Summoned his Nimbus.

Nothing happened. *Too far to do it wordlessly*, he thought unconcernedly. "*Accio* Broomstick," he intoned quietly.

Still nothing. It felt strange and out of place to break the silence, but better than his spine. "*ACCIO BROOMSTICK*," he commanded.

Immediately the crunch of breaking glass sounded from somewhere below, but Draco had anticipated that. He was quite unprepared for the sudden, very nearby slam of a window sash, followed immediately by the voice of Professor Snape.

"Draco Malfoy! Explain yourself!"

He nearly jumped out of his skin, but his legs were thankfully more focused on preserving said skin than on reacting to Snape's shout. His sarcasm, too, obviously remained intact. "Well, about eighteen years ago, my mum and dad loved each other very much, so they--"

"SILENCE!" *What in seven hells was I thinking?* "I will meet you at the ladder below the Divination classroom. Mr. Malfoy, do *not* take any detours on your broomstick!" The sash thudded shut just as the broomstick presented itself as ordered.

Apparently Snape couldn't wait to throttle him; he met Draco at the French window down the corridor. Draco noted rather calmly that Snape had turned that peculiar shade of salmon once again, as he climbed back inside the castle. The professor said nothing, and raised a hand sharply to indicate Draco had best do the same. He spun on his heel and did not turn around again until they were both inside his office in the dungeon.

Black eyes met gray, and Draco confirmed Snape's concerns that the young man was suicidal by casually asking, "So, what were you doing up there?"

"That is MY line, Draco," Snape hissed dangerously.

Draco sighed. "It was an easy climb. I just felt like doing it."

"AT FOUR O'CLOCK IN THE BLOODY MORNING?"

He almost pointed out he couldn't hope to get away with it at any other hour, but some part of him recognized that Death By Snape would surely be worse than plummeting from the North Tower. "I can't sleep lately," he mumbled, eyes downcast.

Snape's hands balled up into fists, then reached for his throat, then returned to his own sides in a motion too deliberate to be described as "falling." "SIT!" he barked, and Draco obeyed after a sheepish glance. Snape followed him to the armchairs before the fire and sat across from him, gritting his teeth such that Draco could see the muscles of his jaw bunch and give, bunch and give.

"Miss Granger told me you've been acting strangely," Snape finally said. "I thought you'd come up with a brilliant strategy. Inspiring her to look after you, appealing to her sense of responsibility, her maternal instincts, what not. It was working so beautifully that I thought perhaps you'd snatched the pebble from your father's hand at last, Draco. Am I to interpret, tonight, that this was no cunning scheme on your part, but you have truly *lost your mind*?"

Draco waited until he was sure the older wizard was waiting for a response, not just pausing dramatically between rants. "I don't think I've gone nutters, Uncle Severus, but I suppose anything's possible," he finally conceded. "I told you, I can't sleep. Patrolling the castle all night helps me... wear out enough to go to bed."

"The roof of Professor Trelawney's bedroom is not on your route."

Sighing, Draco slumped in his chair. "I know, I know. It really was an easy climb. I just felt like it. I didn't think I'd wake her up--I was very quiet!"

Snape scowled. "Her gargoyle came tapping at her window, complaining of a rude man hurting its feelings." Draco nearly groaned, but palmed his forehead instead. "She floored me in a state of near-hysterics, reeking of cheap sherry and barely dressed. For that alone, I ought to have you expelled!"

"Why you?" Draco asked, unconcerned by the threat; if Snape meant to expel him, he would already be outside the main gate with a boot-print on his bottom.

"I presume that 'Dumbledore' was too difficult to pronounce in her current state."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Severus," said Draco, and he meant it. "I'll climb the West Tower next time; the owls won't get all worked up."

Snape's shoulders relaxed at last. "What's the matter with you, Draco? I'm beginning to think the suite is cursed--just when Granger seems back to her usual swotty self, you're creeping around the castle all night like a vampire."

"I'll be all right, Uncle Severus. Really. I just... It's not easy with Dad in prison and I'm not really part of Slytherin anymore..." He was referring to the physical House, but as soon as he said it, Draco's breath caught in his throat, for he suddenly understood that this change went beyond the mere location of his bedroom.

Snape eyed him thoughtfully and nodded.

17

Chapter 17 of 22

Draco drops his guard, big time.

* * * November 18, 1997 (continued) * * *

Judging by the cheers and catcalls that greeted him at breakfast, the little gargoyle had quite a network around Hogwarts. Draco held his head high and put on his best unfathomable smile. Most of the girls were scowling at him, but the seventh-year Ravenclaw prefect ran her gaze down his body and back up in such a predatory way, he had no doubt he was welcome to climb *her* roof any time.

"Checking out Trelawney through her window?" mocked Blaise as he budged over so Draco could sit beside him. "You gotta come visit the dungeon, Dray, if you're resorting to *that* bint."

Laughing, Draco reached for a plate of toast. "Trust me, B, that wasn't the view I was after."

"Why *were* you climbing her tower, then?"

"Because it was there, man. Because it was there." Leave it to Blaise to set him up with a straight line like that. His friend grinned and punched his upper arm, then both set to work on breakfast.

Granger came in sometime later and sat down casually with Neville Longbottom, but after a moment of huddled conversation, she turned and stared at Draco in pure disbelief. He smirked and tipped his chin in wry acknowledgement, and she spun back around immediately, hunching her shoulders. *She's so funny*, he thought with a grin, then considered stabbing himself in the hand with his own fork.

Though it wasn't Snape's turn to patrol that night, he made a point of accompanying Draco, which included escorting the Head Boy back to his suite when the rounds were finished. "I trust I needn't instruct your portrait to keep you contained once I leave?" the professor asked quietly.

"I get it, Uncle Severus," Draco sighed impatiently. He gave the password, seeing to his relief that the common room was both empty and dark. "Tell Mrs. Snape goodnight for me," he added somewhat awkwardly.

"I'll be flooring her in an hour; I shall give her your regards."

Floo... what the hell? "She's not here?" he asked, reflexively pushing the portrait nearly shut.

Snape stiffened; Draco had hit a nerve. "My wife lives elsewhere, Draco. Somewhere very remote. She can't bear to be around strangers, both dreading and wishing she could hear them. I only see her when I leave the castle."

Fuck, no wonder you're so grouchy all the time. "How long have you been married?"

"ENOUGH, Draco," Snape growled, but relented with an annoyed huff. "Eight years. Good evening." He pulled the portrait back open and gestured for Draco to go in, in a way that suggested a shove would soon follow if he didn't proceed voluntarily.

Eight years? EIGHT? That fucker's been married longer than I've been at Hogwarts? The portrait literally whapped his bottom when it swung shut. He knew Snape could keep secrets but this was beyond all reason. If there was ever a night Draco needed to spend some time walking, it was this one.

Don't even toy with it. You KNOW he's right outside. Draco sighed. The greasy git probably didn't even need to lurk out there, he probably had a suit of armor or a portrait standing guard. *Shit, I better make nice with that damn gargoyle or every eye in the castle will be on me for the rest of the year!* He wondered dully how one went about soothing the feelings of a creature carved of granite. *A diamond, perhaps? Fuck that.* Even Pansy wasn't worth a diamond, not even when she was sucking him all the way down to the balls.

Now there's a thought. He hadn't taken an evening bath in ages. Maybe the warm water would break up some of the tension in his shoulders, and maybe Granger would put on a show. "Why the hell not?" he muttered to himself with as much cold contempt as he could muster, trumping the annoying pang of guilt that squeezed his belly as he gathered the potion and donned his bathrobe. *It's only Granger,* he reminded himself through gritted teeth. *She's just a goddamn know-it-all Mudblood.*

He cast the enchantment before turning on the tap, and found to his complete surprise that Granger was, in fact, already in her room. A single candle flickered on the stand beside her bed, where she lay on her back. Her nightdress was still lumped atop the woodstove. One hand cupped a breast, while the other moved in steady, firm circles through the tuft of curls between her legs.

Oh, yeah.

Draco leaned back to rest his bum against the edge of the countertop, letting his robe fall open, the bath forgotten. He set down the wand and the potion without looking, and barely registered the clatter of his wand sliding into the sink. He was hard already, but he was also determined to enjoy this treat to its fullest.

She must have been at it for some time already; her breath was rapid and soft little cries were accompanying each exhalation. *That's right, Granger. Show me how it's done.* He raised his own hands to his throat and swept them down to his nipples, giving each a firm pinch as he widened his stance. Draco groaned aloud, dropping one hand desperately to his cock. *Do it, witch.*

She was already beginning to buck her hips into her hand, and though Draco could probably have caught up with her, he wanted very much to watch this. He curled his long, slender fingers around himself but did not move, waiting raptly for her to finish first. Her back began to arch, her head tipped back to expose her throat. *Come on, yes.* He really could catch up; it felt like the slightest movement would bring him over. "Granger," he croaked, determined to see this to the end before he gave in.

"Nnn, oh, Draco!" cried the girl as her fingers froze and stiffened and she threw her knees wide apart into the air.

He didn't even get a chance to stroke himself; the sights and sounds were more than he could take. His knees gave way and he slid partway down the front of the cabinet, throbbing and sticky and utterly blissful. "Granger," he moaned when he could. "Granger."

This is too rich to pass up, he reasoned as soon as he came back to Earth. Draco yanked the nearest hand towel from the rack and dashed from the bathroom, rubbing his hand dry. He knocked on the girl's door and threw the towel toward the bathroom door, then cinched the belt on his robe. He had time; she couldn't possibly answer until she fumbled into some clothes, too.

He realized his cheeks were probably suspiciously ruddy, but what the hell, it was pretty dark. *She'll be too flustered to notice, anyway,* he thought with a wicked grin. He rested his forearm against the doorjamb, as much to support his shaky legs as to appear casual.

"What?" the girl squeaked, wide-eyed and flushed as she flung open the door. She was clearly expecting some sort of emergency, and the look on her face was utterly priceless as she realized it was not only him at the door, but he was standing right over her wearing nothing but a bathrobe. He wanted so badly to laugh it was almost painful, but he kept it to a too-broad smile.

"Easy, easy," he chided. "Just about to have a bath, and wondered if you felt like a fire later?" Her breath was still thready, but he realized suddenly that his was too. *Shit!* Well, at least he had the advantage of *knowing* what happened; the girl could only guess.

"What's wrong, Granger?" he asked, but it didn't come out nearly as innocently as he meant it to. Her eyes narrowed and they assessed each other with a long, knowing stare. "Something on your mind?" he purred.

"Malfoy..." she said hesitantly, then reached for the door. He caught her hand, her right, the one she'd just... Before he had time to think about it and reject the idea as insanely stupid, Draco tugged her hand to his chin and drew a deep breath through his mouth.

Oh, Goddess. He hadn't known he could get that hard so soon afterward. Draco's eyes fell shut and all thought ceased, leaving him to breathe deeply, over and over, filling his mouth with an essence like fresh baked bread and butter, only oh, so much better. He slowly turned his head to draw his face across her fingers, then did it again, this time letting the tip of his tongue protrude between his lips.

She made a little gasping sound and reality crashed back on top of him.

Her expression was an unlikely mixture of horror and desire. Draco could feel it in the pit of his stomach; he'd shown her far too much, willingly surrendered his innermost truth to this witch, who was far too smart not to recognize it. He set his jaw and reared his head, though he clung to her wrist as though his hand had declared a mutiny from the rest of him.

"Pathetic, isn't it?" he asked in a scraped voice. "That I've become so hard up." He finally managed to get the message to his hand and let go of her wrist, but he couldn't quite bring himself to cast it away with contempt.

Slackjawed, she gave her head a tiny shake and took a timid step closer to him. Draco threw up his hands before his chest and backed away. "No, Granger," he grated. "Not even now. I'm nobody's fuck."

Draco spun on his heel without looking for the impact of his words and dashed into his room.

A/N: Okay, I was trying for something sexy but tweaked, that would hopefully address some of the tired old DM/HG cliché's in a new way. Did it work? I have a few more chapters in me right now, but it seems like this story isn't particularly popular, so I'm not sure it's worth any more work.

It becomes expedient to make an apology.

* * * November 22, 1997 * * *

The first time one of the downspouts suddenly swivelled in the courtyard and discharged a cold gush of water onto Draco's head, he chalked it up to some prankster. The second time it happened, he began to keep a careful tally of everyone in his vicinity. By the fourth time, he reckoned he needed to go have a talk with that gargoyle.

He flew up on his broomstick just before sunset and found the granite creature in the exact same pose as he'd last seen it, but it took one look at him and flared its snout. The eyes began to glow a dull red.

"Oh, come now," Draco said crossly. "At least give a man a chance, won't you?" It turned its head toward the wall, but the glow faded. "Look, I'm sorry I was so rude to you the other night," he began in an unconvincing tone. "You probably haven't had a single visitor up here since the tower was built, and then the very first one tells you to sod off. I can see why you're so upset." Though it moved not one bit, Draco perceived a drop in tension, and smirked to himself.

"Here's the thing: A climber takes on a rooftop like this for the challenge. I didn't come up here to have an easy climb of it. When you boosted me up like that, it was... sort of an insult, you know. To my skills as a climber. I thought you were trying to tell me you didn't think I could make it."

The gargoyle turned around with knitted brows, and Draco knew he was in the home stretch. "Plus, it rather threw off my concentration, you know. Having my foot suddenly moving like that. I might've let go from the surprise! So really, it wasn't until later that I realized you were only trying to be... helpful. And that's why I came up to apologize for being so rude at the time. You gave me a bit of a fright, is all!"

The eyes began to glow a delicate pink and Draco figured his days as a gutter snipe were at an end. He reached out amiably to scratch the creature's head, but soon regretted that he'd flown into reach: the gargoyle reached out with a massive clawed foot and caught hold of the front of his broomstick. "Whoa, steady on, there!" Alarmed, Draco reached for his wand, but before he could hex the thing, it pushed off its little pedestal with the other foot and settled contentedly on the broom handle.

They plummeted fifty meters before the broom could adjust to the additional weight. "Morgan le Fay, you might have killed us both!" Draco railed at the thing, but it merely ruffled its batlike wings into a more comfortable pose. Draco groaned. There was no way his broomstick could haul that boulder back up the North Tower; descent was the only option.

Not wanting to be seen like this, Draco flew down with considerable difficulty to the window of their common room and opened it, hoping to slip inside and then coax or shake the gargoyle off the handle of his broom. Unfortunately, the creature obviously took the open window as an invitation, and climbed nimbly onto the sill. It then gave a mighty flap of its stone wings and sailed gracefully to the mantelpiece of their fireplace.

Draco had managed to avoid Granger completely since his humiliation, but he knew he'd have to explain the new presence in their common room. He left a note tacked to the frame of the portrait at the door and hoped it would suffice. But some part of him knew it wouldn't be that easy, and he sighed in resignation when he heard the portrait click shut. It was less than a minute before she knocked.

He pulled open the door with a huff. "What?"

"Don't 'what' me, Draco Malfoy. Why is there a gargoyle on the mantel?"

"I know you can read," he sneered, pointing at the note in her hand.

"Indeed," she said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as she read the parchment aloud. "'Granger: Mind the new gargoyle.' Nice and succinct, I'll give you that, Draco, but hardly an explanation. I never would have pegged you as the type for tacky furnishings--"

"Don't call it tacky!" he hissed in an earnest plea. "At least not loud enough for her to hear you," he amended miserably. There was no way out of this except an explanation.

"Look, you've heard about my climb the other night," he began quietly. Granger nodded, grinning in earnest now. "Well, the little bint's had all her mates around the castle dumping water on my head for four days now. I went up there to, ah, make peace with her, and she, well, sort of crawled onto my broomstick."

Granger went wide-eyed. "It *followed you home?*"

Draco sighed, and Granger laughed out loud. "It's not funny," he grouched, but damn it all, some idiotic part of his brain apparently agreed with her. "Stop laughing," he snarled, even as he began to chuckle.

"See?" Granger gasped, pointing at him. "It *is* too funny!" She spun round and flounced happily to the fireplace, casting an *Incendio* on her way. "A pet gargoyle for the suite! Have you named it yet?" She began petting its cold talons.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Be my guest."

She studied it thoughtfully for a moment and said, "Rocky?"

He scoffed. "It's a girl."

"A girl? How can you tell?" She tried to peer discreetly between the stony claws, but it revealed nothing.

"Trust me on this," Draco grumbled.

He left for Patrol early to stop at the kitchens for dinner, which he'd missed in the "excitement" of settling in the new "pet." When he returned to the suite, there was a proper fire blazing in the hearth and the gargoyle was a picture of contentment on the mantel, its eyes glowing orange like the coals beneath. Granger was there, too, sitting on the divan, nonetheless. *What the hell is she up to*, he asked himself, but it failed to raise his guard. She was *smiling* at him, and damn it, he just didn't feel like fighting at that moment.

He took his customary spot on the other end of the divan, but he kept his eyes on the ridiculous gargoyle. "You know, it does lend a bit of atmosphere to this place," he finally said.

Granger snorted. "I think so, too! Sort of traditional. Right out of the history books."

"Once upon a midnight dreary,' and all that," Draco quipped. "All we need are a few skulls, maybe with some very drippy candles on top..."

"Exactly!" she cried, giggling. "We can host a theme party before the Yule Ball--A Return to the Classics!"

The Yule Ball. Shite.

Granger was admiring the new pet again, and missed his sudden gloom. "I like her," she said matter-of-factly. "But she still needs... What is it?" She'd turned back to Draco, and her voice had gone serious.

"Nothing." *What the hell was I thinking, sitting out here?* As he tried to rise up from the divan, she put a hand on his knee. "Don't touch me!" he snapped. *Bad tactic. Egad, she looks almost like Mother.*

"Now listen, Draco," Granger began, her voice low and unyielding. "I'm sorry you embarrassed yourself the other night. I'm embarrassed too, you know. But there's no need to go on sulking. It happened, it's over, now we move on, all right?"

"No. No, it's not all right. Look, Granger..." He wasn't quite sure what to say, only that he wanted it to hurt, to make her leave him alone. "I know the score here. It's been 'Draco' this and 'Draco' that since the Halloween Ball. I sent a little magic down your spine, and now you act like the hottest little tart in the castle. You're not. It was just a dance, Granger. Get over it."

That speech would have set Pansy off like a Longbottom potion, but in her usual infuriating fashion, Granger merely sat back and gazed at him thoughtfully. He stared back, refusing to blink, but feeling more childish with every passing second. It was a relief when Granger finally sighed and shook her head.

"Maybe you need to go spend your evenings down in Slytherin again, so you'll have someone to spar with. Because these games, they don't interest me at all. It's hard for me to believe that anyone really enjoys it, luring and baiting all the time, then plunging in the knife, but maybe that's just the difference between Slytherin and Gryffindor.

"You were kind to me for a few weeks, Draco, and it was nice. It was a whole new side of you, and I liked it. I liked dancing with you, too. The magic came when I danced with Harry, and with Professor Snape, but even so, it was somehow more intense with you. I thought that might be a sign that we could be friends. Harry and I weren't friends right off the bat, you know; it took a while for us to warm up to each other. And I've only become friends with Professor Snape over this past year—I used to think he was a right bastard."

"He is," whispered Draco, quietly and fondly.

"He can act the part, that's for sure," Granger agreed coolly. "But he also knows when to turn it off. I can't imagine him *ever* calling Mrs. Snape a little tart."

She rose smoothly from the divan and went into her room as Draco clutched his hands tightly to his belly and fought to keep his breath steady. Only after her door clicked shut did he dare even to raise his eyes. Twin tears spilled immediately onto each side of his face, and he wondered how it could be so much easier to speak frankly to a creature made of stone than to her.

19

Chapter 19 of 22

Draco has a little talk with a trusted friend.

* * * November 23, 1997 * * *

Draco paused before knocking. *You can do this. It's not THAT bad. And the alternative...* He didn't want to think about it. He steeled himself and rapped smartly on the door.

Snape opened it with his customary sneer, but when he saw who was calling, he relaxed his features and ushered Draco in with a silent wave. "Good morning," he said rather sharply once the door was safely closed. "A bit early for you on a Sunday, is it not?"

Draco's resolve was rapidly dwindling, but he raised his chin and looked Snape in the eye. "I thought if I came early, you might have a bit of time. To talk. With me. This morning."

Snape had pulled his chair back from his desk, but he froze in mid-sit to eyeball Draco in disbelief. "Merlin's beard, Draco, you're stuttering like a first-year asking a girl to the Yule Ball. What's the matter?"

What's the matter? I wish I knew. Draco's throat began to tighten, and he was suddenly quite sure this was a terrible idea.

Snape, however, eyed him carefully and snapped upright to escort him to the private parlor beyond his office. Draco sighed. The man always could see right through him—well, through everybody, really, but he chose to use that power for kindness only in certain cases. Draco swallowed hard, willing his voice to come out steady.

"Uncle Severus... May I just ask you some things? Without getting the third degree?"

A hint of a smile played across the older man's lips. "No promises, Draco; however, feel free to start this round." Snape settled into an overstuffed leather armchair and clasped his hands over his waist, obviously in for the duration. With silent thanks, Draco took the other chair, though he was far too tense to settle into it comfortably.

He'd thought this through carefully, and paused only a moment before asking, "How did you find your wife?"

His immediate reaction was to roll his eyes, but upon seeing the sincere urgency in Draco's face, Snape relented and sighed noisily. "I assume you want to know how I came to marry her, rather than how we met?" Biting his lip, Draco nodded. Snape stared at the lamp on the table between them a moment before speaking.

"I was assigned to torture her, Draco, by the Dark Lord." He said it matter-of-factly, as though this was a perfectly normal blind date for a Death Eater. "He had specific plans for her. He wanted her will utterly destroyed, yet she was to be left physically unharmed and mentally stable. She'd shown considerable resistance to the Imperius curse; Voldemort knew he couldn't hope to keep her under control with traditional means. So he entrusted me with the task of breaking her.

"Needless to say, this was a daunting task at best, even for an ambitious young Potions Master. I put some study into it immediately, and inquired of the Dark Lord his ultimate purpose for her, that I could tailor my approach. Voldemort didn't want to elaborate, but eventually I convinced him it was necessary." Snape squirmed in his seat and furrowed his brow.

"For lack of a better description, he intended to *breed* with her, Draco. He wanted her to produce his child. He didn't say why at the time, but I could only assume he wished to have a 'spare' in case he was murdered. It was rumored he had created a Horcrux and it seemed reasonable that he ought to have a vessel to put it in, if the need arose.

"From there I fell victim to my own scientific curiosity, for I wondered why the Master would insist upon this witch. Bellatrix LeStrange would have gladly birthed his child, as would several witches in his service. Why bother wasting time forcing this particular one to his will? A bit of poking around, and I discovered the rather chilling answer: my

wife is Voldemort's daughter."

Draco's eyes went as wide and round as saucers, and Snape stared at him, hard and cold, as though judging whether he must kill the younger man to contain that secret. But the moment passed, and Snape shifted uncomfortably again, then continued.

"Obviously, this was not the Master's first attempt at creating a 'backup body.' He murdered the mother when he discovered she'd defied him and produced a girl, but before smiting the child, he apparently realized that she'd make a fine incubator for a second attempt--and the resulting child would be three-quarters 'him,' as opposed to half. He just needed her to age and grow to fertility, and of course he wouldn't make the same mistake of impregnating her with her will and magic intact."

"That's *crazy talk*," mumbled Draco.

"My thoughts exactly, Draco. That was the moment when, in my heart, I left his service. I'd seen him make many, many promises to all of us, and I'd even noticed the only ones that ever seemed to come true were those of pain or punishment. But that day, I understood: A man so callous as to use his own daughter in such a fashion... how could any of us expect the rewards he promised? He thought nothing of others, Draco, except what he could take from them. Never to give.

"And then I met her, in her cell in the dungeon." His eyes glazed, lost in memory. "I was doomed from the start," he said wryly, with a fond smile. "She was the most insufferable, defiant, courageous little wench I'd ever laid eyes on.

"You saw what a tiny sprite she is. She was shaking with fear, and rightfully so, yet she asked if I required her attention, as though I was interrupting something important there, in her prison. She was so sincere and droll, I nearly laughed out loud--hardly the proper behavior for a torturer!"

Snape smiled even more broadly and busied himself pouring tea into two cups. "What can I say, Draco? Within minutes I could see she was strong without being overbearing; she was bright; she was kind. Everything the Master wasn't. I couldn't let him destroy her. I told him I must take her home, where I could experiment and adjust my potions. He was so disinterested, he simply waved me away to take care of it and get back to him when the 'project' was complete.

"I spent two weeks giving her a crash course in Occlumency, then fed her a double dose of Draught of the Living Dead and hauled her 'body' before the Master, begging his forgiveness. I'd been tricked by a supplier, I told him, and been given a cheap substitute for one of my ingredients, which killed her. He punished me, of course, but I'd recently curried his favor by bringing him a snippet of that cursed Prophecy that went on to plague your father. So he let me live, and let me keep the 'body' for necromancy--I claimed her organs could be used to make restorative elixirs for him. I was still feeding him a phony pate' up until Potter killed him; thank the Goddess for the placebo effect!"

"Uncle Severus, is this story going to get any more nasty?" Draco croaked.

The older man scoffed, "Don't be such a lightweight, Draco!" but he nodded kindly. "That's the worst of it, though. I kept her hidden, and she charmed me near to death with her gentle ways, and for some strange reason she seemed to think I was all right, too." He raised his hands in a shrug. "I have no explanation for it; she's surely far better than I deserve, and yet she won't even hear of moving on."

That phrase reminded Draco to ask, "When was she cursed with theVox?"

Snape gazed sadly at the candle. "Voldemort cast it when she was an infant, Draco. I was the only Marked man whom she couldn't hear."

20

Chapter 20 of 22

Draco gets to the point, resulting in some serious food for thought.

* * * November 23, 1997 (continued) * * *

"Now, have I assuaged your burning curiosity, or will you keep me from reading the second-years' essays still longer?" asked Snape without a trace of a smile.

Draco grinned, though; he knew the Potions professor disliked marking essays--possibly almost as much as he hated to reveal personal details about himself. "If you can bear putting it off a bit longer..." Snape sniffed and rolled his eyes, but he refilled their teacups.

Now came the difficult part. Draco swallowed hard. "I guess... I was wondering more about how you..."

Even with Draco, Snape had limits. "How I what? Courted her? Convinced her to marry a misanthropic bastard like myself? I understand you've had some success with Miss Parkinson; I hardly think you need advice from me on the process--"

"Not that! It's... oh, never mind. You're right, Uncle Severus. Thank you for the tea." He stood up and prepared to depart, his face suddenly flushed and warm.

"SIT." The weight of Snape's glare alone was enough to collapse his knees. He took the chair again with a reluctant sneer. "First you're stammering, now blushing like a blooming Hufflepuff; if this keeps up, hell's going to freeze over and demons will ice skate. What's the matter, boy?"

What's the matter? What's NOT the matter would be easier. "The Dark Lord's been dead for months, but you never told anyone about her," he blurted. "Why?"

Snape folded his arms and eyed him narrowly for some time before answering. "Admittedly, once Voldemort was dead, there was little need to keep her secret any longer. I suppose in part it's become a habit. Her circumstances are not exactly conducive to breaking it, either. She doesn't wish to parade around on my arm; she's far too shy and fearful for that. And I can only imagine the reaction if I suddenly announced that I had a secret wife, whom no one had ever seen or met, and indeed, whom I couldn't even name. I think my sanity would come into question pretty quickly, don't you?"

He smirked. Draco didn't. "Is that it?"

The professor frowned and studied his teacup for a moment. "There's also a certain... *concern* about revealing her identity," Snape admitted cautiously. "There are always fanatics, Draco, who would fear her just for being his daughter. She doesn't want a lifetime of distrust and accusations on his behalf. Nor does she deserve--" Snape halted in mid-sentence, his jaw dropping in surprise. Draco had turned to face the fire, but not before Snape had seen his eyes welling up.

Busted again.

"There's a girl, Uncle Severus," he began in tired resignation. "I don't... I'm not sure what there is, there might be... but I do know one thing. Mum and Dad won't approve. Nobody would approve. She's not at all the sort of girl they'd expect me to pick."

Draco jumped up and strode to the fireplace, resting his elbows on the mantel and hanging his head in his hands. "She's not the sort of girl I ever expected to pick, for that matter. And I'm quite sure she never expected to pick me, but I think she has. At least a little. But I don't know what to DO!" He screwed up his face, squeezing his eyes tightly shut in hopes of driving back the stupid tears that kept threatening to spill.

Snape's chair creaked, then the older man was beside him, also staring at the fire. They stood in silence for a long time before Snape spoke. "If you're hoping for a load of permissive claptrap about 'following your heart,' Draco, you should seek advice from the Headmaster," he began in a sharp tone. "However, as one who has taken up a dangerous and forbidden union, I... concede there are more important things in this world than the approval of others," he continued grudgingly.

"There are many times when I wish my wife could live here with me. I wish that both the curse on her voice and her father's name would disappear, that she could be free of fear. I was angry with Voldemort, and I continue to be angry with wizard society, for forcing her to live in exile. But never have I questioned or regretted our marriage, Draco. Not once.

"Your father would have you find a well-heeled pureblood girl and settle into a convenient marriage, to spend your passion on lavish pursuits and mistresses. This is what he did, and what his father did before him, and so *ad infinitum*. All have done what was expedient and politically savvy, and it brought your family wealth and power. If such things are what you desire, Draco, then all you need do is follow in their footsteps. Such is the price of keeping intact the Malfoy name and fortune."

Snape turned to face him, and Draco met his unwavering gaze. "If, on the other hand, you stray from the prescribed path, you will have a different sort of life than your father, or his. Whether it will be a *better* life, I can't say, only that it will be *different*. It's up to you to decide which direction to take, Draco, and I urge you to think carefully about the consequences of *both*."

Draco rose to his full height and nodded. "Thanks, Uncle Severus," he said softly, then clasped his shoulders in a quick, firm squeeze and departed.

Snape shook his head as he watched the young man leave. *Gah! Severus, you're going soft*, he thought to himself. Snape was not prone to bouts of self-doubt, but he knew Lucius would expect him to steer Draco toward a "sensible" lifestyle, especially since Lucius was in Azkaban and no longer able to impose his will on his son by himself.

But the fireplace flared emerald green and a pint-sized witch clambered from the flames and tackled him, throwing him back into the armchair with a silent laugh and dozens of rapid-fire kisses, and Snape's uncertainties were soon forgotten.

21

Chapter 21 of 22

It's about frigging time...

* * * Chapter 21: November 23, 1997 (continued) * * *

He'd been nervous about approaching his friend and mentor for advice, but that paled in comparison to what he was about to do. Draco's hands were shaking by the time he reached the Great Hall. He told himself just needed a quick glass of juice to calm his nerves and raise his blood sugar, unwilling to admit that a breakfast detour would give him a few more precious seconds of safety before plunging into the unknown.

As it was, a sip of juice was all he could manage before the butterflies occupying his stomach went into a complete rebellion. *Shite. Better to get it over with*, he thought, rising from his seat as Theo Nott tried to join him. Ignoring his friend's puzzled glare, Draco steeled his face into a semblance of neutrality and plowed up the marble stairs as though climbing the gallows.

The portrait to the suite flew open as he opened his mouth to speak the password, and promptly smacked his forehead.

"Oh, good heavens! Are you hurt? I didn't know you were there!" He was suddenly immersed in a strangely familiar state of Granger + Pain, though this was hardly the metaphorical type. Draco couldn't answer at first; an edge of the carved frame had connected soundly with the nerve behind his right brow and sent a burst of electricity back over his scalp. It was all he could do to keep his feet.

"Here. Let me help you. Oh dear, oh dear--did it get you in the eye? Do you need Madam Pomfrey? I could--"

"Chair," he squeaked, waiting for the stars to stop dancing through his vision.

"Yes, yes, here you go," she fretted, guiding him to the nearest armchair and easing him into it with her arms upon his shoulders. The initial shock now wearing off, Draco began to feel a hint of amusement at her distress, but was still too busy holding his face on to enjoy it.

"Maybe some ice?" Granger piped anxiously after a few seconds of silence.

It broke the tension for him, for this was hardly a serious wound, just an insult, really, and it was already settling down to a dull ache. He knew he oughtn't do it, but he leaned his head back against the chair and groaned, his hands pressed tight against his forehead. "I need," he began, halting with a little gasp. "Could you..."

"What?" said the girl, looking utterly miserable in her concern.

"Kiss and make it all better?" he finally purred, dropping his hands and giving her an impish smile. Or he tried to, at least; he couldn't quite convince his right eye that it was truly out of danger and could open again without fear.

She stared long enough for it to sink in (which wasn't very long at all), then rolled her eyes and sank onto the tuffet in front of his chair. "You troll. I was really worried!"

"Well, take comfort that it really does hurt," he groused, but smiled at her. "Feels like a bolt of lightning struck my face. Where were you off in such a hurry? Not going to America already, are you?"

Oops.

Granger sat up very straight and eyed him strangely. "Going where?" she asked cautiously.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. It had been on his mind for too long now, and he'd let it slip out. *Now what?* The blow to his forehead had unsettled him more than he'd realized; he should already have made a response. *FUCK!* Reduced to the truth *again*.

"America. The All-Star Quidditch game in Area 51. I heard Potter... invited you."

She cocked her head, puzzled. "You did? I didn't think I'd mentioned it to anyone. Well, that was weeks ago, I suppose I might have," she mused, then looked up sharply. "Only I'm not going. Where'd you get the idea I was going?" Her eyes narrowed and the concern left her voice. "Did someone from the *Prophet* come round to snoop about my schedule? Dumbledore told them not to come hounding anyone here for my whereabouts--"

"Down, girl," Draco chided, smiling far too broadly in relief. "Nothing like that. I heard you were invited and I assumed you were going. That's all. But you're not going?" He hadn't meant for it to come out as a question, but he was so delighted that it slipped away from him.

Hermione snorted. "Of course not! An overblown Quidditch match followed by photo ops and autographs all evening?" She stuck out her tongue. "No, thank you!"

"You were at the last World Cup," he pointed out rather lamely.

"'Last' being the operant word in that sentence, as far as I'm concerned. One was quite enough."

"But Potter... Weasley. Krum. They'll all be there." Draco forced himself to shut the hell up before he got into further trouble, though it was hard to imagine how he could make things any worse from there. Granger squinted at him again, the little cogs turning swiftly in her head.

"What about them?"

"I think I got hit harder than I realized," Draco said, but it was so utterly transparent that neither of them bothered to acknowledge it.

Granger sat staring at him for some time before a tiny smile started to show at the corners of her mouth. But it stopped there; there was no twinkle in her eyes, no merriment. "If this were anyone else, I'd guess that was a hint of jealousy," she said very carefully. "But with you, who knows? If you're starting up another game with me, Malfoy--"

"I'm not. No games," he said, grimacing at the harsh sound of his surname. "Granger... Hermione," he began, but immediately went blank. She wasn't going to America, wasn't drawn in by Potter's frank invitation to his bed, nor by Weasley or even Viktor Krum. She was right there with him. She'd danced with him, sat with him before the fire, tolerated that idiotic gargoyle.

You idiot, how many more chances do you think you're going to get?

Draco shifted his hands to her waist, keeping his gaze firmly locked with hers. A whole new sort of tension began to well between them, deliberate and sensual, each gauging the other's intent. He leaned closer and stopped. "No more games," he whispered.

She caught her breath as her gaze dropped to his mouth, and he needed no further permission.

22

Chapter 22 of 22

Just another Jammy Monday.

* * * November 24, 1997 * * *

He felt like he must have one of those Muggle lighted signs flashing over his head as he walked from the Great Hall to Charms. Every innocent glance (or fearful glance, or sneer, or even the deliberately avoidant non-glance of mischief-makers) brought warmth to his cheeks. Draco Malfoy was a man with a *secret*.

They couldn't possibly know, he reminded himself constantly. He was a Malfoy, and a consummate Slytherin! He knew damn well how to school his features into aloof neutrality no matter what his internal state. He checked his look (discreetly, of course) in every polished suit of armor he passed--rock steady and unrevealing, cool as a cucumber. Even though his insides were more like pink, bubbling champagne.

They'd kissed for hours. Kissed and talked, then kissed some more and talked some more. It had been the most sensual evening he'd ever spent. No rush, no fear of interruption, and perhaps oddest of all, no sense that he had permission to proceed further. It wasn't that she was resisting him--she certainly never pulled away--but there was some sort of restraint there, some guiding force he couldn't quite identify. Odd. He would have enthusiastically brought the evening to its natural conclusion, but something about her held him back.

That it might have been something within himself never consciously occurred to the 18-year-old.

It was very hard to get out of bed this morning. The thick logs in the fireplace had burned down to embers before they'd dozed on the divan. This was just after their last chat, her warm weight on his chest, their legs tangled. He snapped awake after what could only have been a few minutes, his whole body jerking back to awareness. She'd raised her head and given him the sweetest of smiles and said, "It's late."

"Early, actually." He eased his hand into her hair, watching it disappear almost to the wrist.

She squinted at him suspiciously, but smiled and put her head back on his chest. "We really ought to go to bed."

Though he was tempted beyond reason to reply, "Your room or mine?" Draco only nodded, playing with her hair with slow, small movements. She sighed contentedly, but followed with, "We're never going to get up for class tomorrow."

Draco grunted an affirmative, wriggling under her into a slightly more cozy position. Again they settled into a brief, contented quiet.

But she finally pushed herself up, catching his hand as it trailed out of her hair and kissing his fingertips before letting go. He shifted onto his side, making room for her to sit

a moment, anticipating that she might be a little wobbly at first--and grinning fiendishly when that turned out to be the case. He watched her silently as she rose, ran her hand lightly over his hip, and went to her room. "Goodnight, Hermione," he said as she lifted the latch, earning a warm glance.

"Goodnight, Draco."

He'd been sorely tempted to run and get Zabini's potion, but in the end, he decided he didn't feel like rushing.

Monday morning came along with its typical unrelenting rudeness, only this time his insomnia didn't kick in. All those nights he'd been unable to sleep seemed to assert themselves in full when his alarm went off. He more or less rolled out of bed one section at a time, his feet hitting the cold stone floor as his upper body remained horizontal for a few more precious seconds. "Damn, I'm tired," he muttered to no one.

He barely made it to breakfast before classes started, smirking impishly when he found that Granger wasn't even there. He wrapped a pastry carefully in parchment and stuffed it in his backpack. So what if anyone saw? They'd just think he was still hungry.

When she slunk into the Charms classroom twenty minutes late, trying to mask her utterly goofy grin with a facade of chagrin, he had to bite the inside of his cheeks to keep from laughing.

Jammy cow, he thought. *At least we didn't have Potions first thing!*

By the Goddess, she was such a Gryffindork! The girl didn't have a slick bone in her body. Helped to slay a bloody Dark Lord, and here she was, spending the morning bumbling about all moon-faced like, well, a school-girl. At least she avoided his eyes. *Mother of Merlin, she'll probably come apart at the seams if she looks me in the eye.*

Another first for Draco Malfoy, and one that he found surprisingly pleasant.

After Charms, he stopped her just inside the classroom door and waited until the other seventh-years had left before handing her the pastry. Her eyes had widened eagerly at the sight of the blueberry filling staining the parchment. "I'm starving! Thank you!" she said in barely more than a whisper.

"Shouldn't skip breakfast, Granger," he said officiously. "Most important meal of the day."

She paused from chomping into the pastry just long enough to level a glare. "I've picked up a bad influence," she said after gulping down a quick bite.

Draco smiled broadly, the first indulgence he'd given himself that morning. Leaning in close enough to feel the heat radiate from her skin, he whispered, "You don't know the half of it!" He cast one furtive glance around the classroom to assure himself Flitwick wasn't looking, then kissed her ear. Smugly noting that she froze in place with a look of concentration at this gesture, he added, "See you this afternoon," and sauntered off to his next class.

A secret for *two*.