

The Man in Charge

Chapter 3

The marble throne room echoed with the furious voice of Lord Voldemort. His scarlet eyes blazed, and his serpentine face twisted in disgust as he raged at the pathetic assembly of Death Eaters trembling before him. Wands dangled limp in uncertain hands, and their legs quivered with fear. "Fools!" Voldemort hissed, rising from his seat so abruptly that Bellatrix flinched and Lucius nearly dropped to his knees.

"You let that insufferable man slip through your fingers again?" Voldemort's voice was deceptively calm, but the air in the room seemed to constrict with every syllable. "Am I surrounded by incompetents? Do you need me to guide your every step and hold your hand?" He stalked the marble floor, his cloak trailing like the shadow behind him, and he paused in front of Nott, who stared at the floor, sweat glistening on his brow.

Voldemort's thin, pale finger jabbed the air, landing inches from Nott's face. "You. I put you in charge of the Diagon Alley raid. Yet Potter killed one of my followers, captured two others, and continued shopping without a care in the world," he hissed. "And, pray tell, where were you during all of this?" Voldemort asked.

Nott gulped loudly and trembled as he was forced to look his dark master in the eyes. "Well, My Lord ... You see ... my wife had come down with the flu, and my dog needed his rabies shots, so I ..."

"SILENCE, YOU PITIFUL FOOL!" he snarled. "I don't want to hear your excuses!"

He turned and stalked from one Death Eater to the next, his contempt radiating in waves. "Yaxley, you lost a dozen men to Potter last week. Do you know how tedious it is to replace twelve full-grown wizards? And you, Dolohov ..." He snapped his head around, simultaneously freezing half the room with his gaze. "... I am told you turned and ran while your men fell. Are you all so incapable?"

"It w-was really more of a brisk jog, My Lord," Dolohov stammered while averting his gaze.

"SHUT IT!" Voldemort shouted.

Bellatrix, dutiful as ever, dropped to her knees, groveling, "My Lord, we will find him. I swear on my life ..."

"Spare me your oaths, Bella," Voldemort spat. "I want results, not blubbing." He raised his wand, and the tip glowed with a furious, sickly light. "Listen well. By sundown, I want Harry Potter at my feet. If I do not have him, I will flay the skin from the next of you to fail me." Several

Death Eaters gasped. "You will scour the countryside, the cities, and even the sewers if you must. Do not return here without him. If you must, burn the world to ashes."

He let the heavy and suffocating words hang in the air. Everyone in the room shook and trembled, knowing that it was going to be bad for them, no matter what. Voldemort swept his gaze across the room one last time, then swept back his cloak and seated himself, his eyes burning with the anticipation of their inevitable failure.

The cowed and desperate Death Eaters exchanged glances filled with terror, shame, and a mounting sense of doom as they prepared to carry out his impossible, bloody command.

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The two Death Eaters assigned to the Upper Flagly night patrol had neither names that anyone could remember nor reputations of their own. The first was a stringy, pale man with patchy facial hair and the half-crazed look of someone who had spent too much time being berated by a crazy Dark Lord. The second was plump, with jowls that wobbled in the yellow lamplight, and he sweated constantly through his dark wool coat, despite the chill. They had drawn the short straw, which meant they would spend the evening trudging up and down drizzly cobblestones and keeping a nervous lookout for Harry Potter.

Upper Flagly's main wizarding section was alive with the Saturday-night crowd. Aurors, off-duty Hit Wizards, and Ministry flunkies were all drifting between the magical pubs and clubs that dotted the relatively short street. The two Death Eaters kept to the shadows, their faces hidden by low-brimmed hats and thick scarves. They did their best to look like just another pair of men out for a stiff drink.

It was while skulking in the alley behind a dirty pub that they first spotted him. Out of a side door of the Garrotted Gargoyle, the most notorious club in the district, stepped Potter. He was taller and broader in the shoulders than the gossip suggested. He had the wild black hair and those unmistakable green eyes that seemed to glow even under the sickly street lamps. But he wasn't alone. Hanging from his arm was a blonde bombshell whose platinum hair cascaded over her shoulders in loose curls. It was none other than Narcissa Malfoy. She wore a red dress that clung to her hips and thighs, showing off every cock-hardening curve the woman possessed. Her heels clicked with every step as she leaned into Potter's side, laughing softly at something he had just whispered in her ear.

"That's him," hissed the stringy one, his voice full of nervousness. He ducked behind a rusted rubbish bin, searching for the right moment to attack. "Bloody hell, I think that's Malfoy's wife with him!"

The plump one squinted, uncertain if it was really her. "You sure? Last I heard, she was holed up in France with the kid. Maybe she's ..."

“Look at the ass on her. I’d know that ass from anywhere. That’s Malfoy’s wife.”

The two watched as Potter spun Narcissa around. His hands found a home on her wide, jutting ass, and she pulled him down into a kiss so full of heat that the Death Eaters each shifted awkwardly, overcome by jealousy. When she finally broke away, she nipped at Potter’s lip, whispered into his ear, and then strolled up the street, her wide hips swaying. After a few more steps, Narcissa disappeared with a crack of the air.

Potter lingered in the alcove, taking in the cool air. He pulled a small bottle of liquor from inside his jacket pocket, drank it down, and tossed it in a bin before smoothing back his unruly hair. He looked like he didn’t have a care in the world. He must not know he was being hunted by practically every Death Eater in the country. The Death Eaters exchanged a look. This was their chance.

They spilled from the alley in a coordinated pincer attack with their wands drawn, and their steps were nearly silent on the wet stones. The stringy one led with a silent Stunner, and red light burst from his wand tip, painting Potter’s coat with color. Potter spun before it even left the wand, ducking so low that the spell singed the shop sign behind him. The plump Death Eater let off a volley of Bone-Breakers in rapid succession, sending up chips of mortar and glass. Potter snapped his own wand up and, with a single, contemptuous flick, caught both men in a localized hurricane of wind and glass. The first Death Eater was thrown against the wall, his head cracking against the brick, but he was up again instantly, with blood running down the side of his face. The second Death Eater landed on the pavement and groaned, still clutching his wand.

They circled Potter at a distance, sending a crossfire of curses, but he played them with effortless cruelty. Harry ducked, spun, and countered, always moving, and always grinning like he was thrilled to be back in battle. He let one curse graze his sleeve, just to see the look of hope flare in their eyes before he extinguished it with a brutal counterattack.

The stringy Death Eater tried to close in for a point-blank attack, but Harry pointed his wand at the man’s elbow and lazily flicked his wand. The swirling streak of light struck, and the arm came off at the joint, spraying blood all over the street. The Death Eater howled and dropped to his knees, cradling the stump in disbelief. He used his last remaining hand to shakily point his wand at Potter, but he punted the wand from his hand and sent it clattering into the gutter before turning his attention to the plump one. The plump Death Eater tried to backpedal, but Harry snapped off a Blasting Curse that struck him square in the chest. Where his chest had been, there was now only a wet, smoking crater and a rapidly collapsing husk.

The stringy Death Eater tried to crawl away, but Harry loomed over him, pressed a boot into his back, and muttered a Severing Charm. The man’s head separated from his body before he had even registered the pain. The head rolled a foot across the pavement, and its mouth was still opening and closing in a last, desperate plea.

Harry slipped his wand back into its holster and surveyed the carnage with a soldier's detachment. He retrieved the wands of his fallen enemies, snapped them in half for good measure, and then stepped over the bodies, his boots leaving smeared, wet prints on the cobblestones. He flung the broken wands into the nearest rubbish bin and carried on. After all, Narcissa was waiting for him in a London hotel.

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The Burrow was empty except for Molly, who was busy doing laundry. Hermione stood in the hallway, wearing a brown knit cardigan. She reached out and knocked on Ginny's bedroom door. The sun was barely up, but Ginny Weasley had always been a morning person, and Hermione was desperate for girl talk with the only person on earth she trusted with the truth.

The door opened after three brisk raps of her knuckles, and Ginny's face appeared. Her red hair was a tangled nest, and her cheeks were still blotchy from sleep. She wore a threadbare Chudley Cannons t-shirt and a pair of loose, high-waisted pajama bottoms. "Hermione!" she said in a still sleepy voice. "Come in!" She stepped aside and waved her friend into the room.

Hermione let herself be ushered inside. Ginny's bedroom walls were full of posters of Holyhead Harpies players. There was a shelf of battered Quidditch gear, and at least two dozen photos, mostly of friends. However, there was an unusually large number of photos of Neville Longbottom, the Boy Who Lived. Ginny flopped back onto her unmade bed, grabbed a rolled-up newspaper from the covers, and patted the mattress beside her. Hermione joined her and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Sorry for the mess," Ginny said. She then snorted. "Actually, I'm not sorry. You've seen worse." She unrolled the Daily Prophet, smoothed it with the palm of her hand, and tapped at a column on the front page. "You have got to hear this. Harry Potter is at it again."

Hermione frowned and glanced down at the column. The headline read, "POTTER STRIKES AGAIN! TWO DEATH EATERS DEAD IN UPPER FLAGLY." Beneath it was a moving picture of Harry Potter. The article described how Harry had "single-handedly dispatched his adversaries using advanced combat magic and a ruthlessness unseen since the great Wizengamot purge of 1793."

Ginny read aloud with enthusiasm. "Eyewitnesses say Potter showed remarkable physical prowess and unusual brutality, completely outclassing the Death Eater scum. You should see the bit about the guy's head. It literally ..." She mimed a chopping motion against her neck, then grinned.

Hermione tried to keep her face neutral, but felt her cheeks coloring. "That's ... impressive," she said, refusing to admit her heart was racing.

Ginny rolled onto her side and propped herself up on an elbow. "That's not even the best part. Listen to this. 'Potter was last seen leaving the scene with an unidentified witch, described as stunningly beautiful, blonde, and dressed in red. Her identity remains unknown, but speculation is rampant.'" Ginny waggled her eyebrows. "That's so hot. You know what I'd do to get a night with Harry fucking Potter?"

Hermione laughed nervously, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Oh, I'm sure you'd be first in line," she said, though her voice wobbled at the end.

Ginny was still grinning. "Admit it," she said, poking Hermione in the thigh with her toe. "You're dying to hear the details. I know you read every word of these, don't you?"

Hermione bit her lip and looked away, feigning interest in the view of the orchard outside the window. In truth, she had read every article ... sometimes twice. Sometimes she would read it with a hand between her thighs, but that was before she had access to the man himself.

Ginny rolled to her back and gave a dramatic sigh. "I really wish I had a man like that. I bet he's even good at ... everything, you know? I've been trying to get Neville to date me, but you can't exactly have a relationship with someone who's never around." Neville was hidden away, safe from Voldemort's thugs. His friends hardly ever saw him these days.

"I've been seeing Michael, but he's not exactly blowing my socks off," Ginny continued. She glanced over at Hermione, who was still blushing furiously. "What's going on with you this morning? You're acting like a first-year with a crush."

Hermione forced a smile, then shrugged, hoping Ginny would drop it. "It's nothing, really. I'm just tired, I guess. I've been helping Professor Vector with the new Arithmancy curriculum, and it's ..."

"Don't bullshit me, Hermione. I know that look." Ginny looked up with narrowed eyes. "You're blushing like mad. Come on. Spill."

Hermione opened her mouth, closed it, then shook her head with a nervous laugh. "I really can't," she said. "It's ... complicated."

Ginny sat up fully now, her gaze laser-focused. "You're shagging someone. Aren't you?" Ginny's tone was gleeful, as if the possibility of Hermione finally finding a man was a delicious piece of gossip. "Is it someone I know?" Ginny asked, leaning forward with great interest.

Hermione hesitated, and her brain flipped through a thousand possible lies, each one weaker than the last. She could see Ginny's excitement growing, and Hermione could tell she was ready to pounce. "Please," Ginny pleaded. "I need to live vicariously through someone. Michael's so ... vanilla."

Hermione's face was now fully pink. She twisted the hem of her cardigan anxiously. "You have to promise on your life ... and the Holyhead Harpies that this never leaves this room," she whispered.

Ginny nodded rapidly. "I swear it on my Quidditch captaincy."

Hermione took a deep breath, then let it out in a slow, trembling exhale. "It's Harry," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Harry Potter."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "No. Fucking. Way."

Hermione nodded, and her lips pressed into a thin, guilty line. "Yes."

Ginny squealed, then clamped both hands over her mouth. Her eyes were bright and wide. "Are you joking? You're not joking. Oh my god." She kicked her feet in the air, then flopped backwards, laughing hysterically. "How did this happen? When did this happen?"

Hermione found herself grinning despite her nerves. "Do you remember the day the Death Eaters tried to set fire to Gringotts, and one of them got stabbed in the bum by a Goblin spear? I went to Diagon Alley to see the damage, and I met him there. He was talking to the Goblins. We talked, and then he took me to lunch. After that, I went to his flat a few times, and eventually we ..." She trailed off, her eyes unfocused when remembering pleasure.

Ginny shrieked again, softer this time, and rolled up to a seated position. "You lucky bitch," she said, and hugged Hermione around the shoulders. "Was it amazing?" She released her hold and leaned in, her eyes shining with vicarious glee. "I want every detail."

Hermione hesitated. She'd expected embarrassment or even jealousy, but Ginny was radiating unbridled curiosity. "It's ... intense," she said softly, and reached to her neck. Ginny then noticed the black silk choker securely wrapped around Hermione's thin neck. Her eyes widened even more.

"Is that ..." Ginny reached out and brushed her fingertips across the silk material. "Did he give you that?"

"Yes," Hermione said, blushing again. "He ... he has a way of making you feel ... owned. I don't know how else to describe it."

Ginny's mouth was open again. "Oh my, Hermione. You're a sub. Our shy bookworm, Hermione Granger, is a bloody sub." She giggled, both delighted and scandalized. "I'm obsessed. Please tell me he's taken you to bed."

Hermione nodded, unable to speak, and Ginny squealed and grabbed a pillow, smothering her own face to keep the sound from attracting Mrs. Weasley. After a moment, she resurfaced. "Did

he ... did you ...” She fanned herself, breathless and unable to go on. “I’m dying. I’m literally dying.”

Hermione hugged her knees and waited for the giggling to subside. “He’s different from any guy I’ve ever met,” she admitted. “He’s so ... confident. Maybe even cocky. He just takes what he wants. It’s scary, but it’s ...” She bit her lip and trailed off.

“Sexy?” Ginny guessed, her eyes shining. “Like, really, really sexy?”

“Yes,” Hermione said through a massive blush, not trusting herself to say more.

Ginny wagged her finger at the choker. “So you’re like his ... what exactly? Girlfriend? Plaything?”

“I don’t know what we are,” Hermione admitted, picking at a loose thread. “We meet when we can. He says he’s protecting me, but it’s more than that. He ... he’s always in charge, and I like being possessed by him.”

Ginny shook her head in admiration. “That’s so fucking hot. You know, after reading about him all last year, I kind of fantasized about this, but you actually did it.” She sent her a mock glare. “I can’t believe you beat me to it.”

Hermione looked down, uncertain, but Ginny squeezed her hand. “All this is safe with me. I won’t tell a soul,” she promised, and Hermione smiled. “But I absolutely have to meet him,” she added, and Hermione’s eyes went wide.