

N O E L L E
DRACONIAN

A HARRY-POTTER FANFICTION



foreword

A B O U T

Draconian was a featured novel under the Fanfiction genre + the winner of the Fanfiction Awards 2016. Thank you all so much for your support.

S Y N O P S I S

Three years ago, the Dark Lord defeated Harry Potter in the battle of Hogwarts, forcing Harry and the rest of the Order members to go into hiding. Desperate to survive after his mother's betrayal, Draco Malfoy was forced to kill his way through the ranks to become the most lethal, most terrifying Death-Eater, second-in-command only to the Dark Lord himself.

Caught in a downward spiral towards self-loathing and destruction, Draco jumps at a chance for redemption offered by his Aunt Andromeda: find Hermione Granger - the girl he once hated; one third of the Golden Trio and possibly the only person who can restore the Order

and end the war.

But when Draco finds Hermione three years later, he soon realises that she's none of those things. The bruised, battered version of Hermione remembers no one but him and has no wish to return to the Order. And now Draco is forced to choose between sending the magic-less witch back onto the battlefield to end the war, or doing whatever it takes to keep her safe in a world ruled by draconian laws.

A B O U T

Post Deathly Hallows AU (three years later); in which -
Harry Potter did not win the Battle of Hogwarts,
Voldemort + Death-Eaters are still alive,
Dead members of the Order are still dead,
& the war is still going on.

DISCLAIMER

I own nothing;
every Harry Potter character and
reference is owned by the wonderful JK
Rowling.

W A R N I N G

dark themes
harry potter spoilers
sexual themes
swearing

character deaths

S T A T U S

Writing complete (May - Aug 2015)

Posting complete (May - December 2015)

01 | lumos

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l u m o s

Illuminates the wand tip.

It was one of those dusty, second-hand patrols he was never supposed to take. But then Theodore Nott, like the fucking tosser that he was, apparated home drunk that night.

Draco was awake - he always was; and so he heard Theo stumble across the living room with loud, clumsy footsteps.

Draco let out a muffled curse under his breath before turning on his side. But before he could close his eyes, there came three loud knocks on his door.

Then there was complete silence.

This time, Draco didn't bother to muffle the swear word that slipped past his lips. He shuffled out of bed, rearranged his features into his perennially annoyed expression and crossed the room to yank open the door.

"What - " he began, only to pause, eyes narrowing when he saw Theo completely passed out on the floor right in front of him. One look at his friend's unconscious form and it was clear to see that he'd far too much to drink. Nevertheless, he nudged Theo with his

foot just for good measure. "Theo."

Nothing.

"Get up, you lazy wanker."

Still nothing.

Draco swore again when he realised that Theo was completely hammered. Fucking great. He stepped over Theo's sleeping form, making sure to kick him accidentally on the way, before going over to the room in the east wing, the one opposite Theo's. He quickly undid the silencing charms on the door before rapping sharply against it.

"Either one of you - head to the Quarry now. Nott's wasted."

There was a pause from the other side of the door, followed by certain muffled whispers and shuffling. Draco knew that

if he listened harder, he'd be able to hear them talking, but he wasn't sure he wanted to. He'd regretted it most of the times he tried, hearing things that planted images in his head he couldn't ever get rid of. Not even with Obliviate.

After awhile, the door opened slightly and he came face to face with a frazzled Pansy Parkinson wearing nothing but a black negligee. She stared back insolently at him for a brief moment before she shook her head. "Yeah, I don't think so. We're kind of in the middle of something here. Blaise just came back from his patrol and - "

"That's why I said either."

" - I'm tied down," her lips curled in a smirk as she raised her hands. To

Draco's utter disgust, they were, indeed, tied together with complicated knots that could only have been made with magic. "We've been going all the times Theo's gotten himself wasted, and Theo has covered for us the times we couldn't make it. I personally think it's time for a change." Her eyes glinted and he knew what was coming even before she asked. "Why don't you go?"

"No."

"Then go get Theo - "

"He's dead to the world."

"Too damn bad," she met his gaze evenly. "Cause Blaise and I aren't going."

"Fucking fine. No one goes." Draco spun on his heel and was heading back

towards his room when Pansy's voice filled the hallway.

"Poor, poor Theo. He's going to get Crucio'd when the Dark Lord finds out. All because his best friend won't help him out. Not even once. Such a shame, isn't it? And to think, Theo has looked up to his best friend for so many years, even to become a horrible Death-Eater, following in the footsteps of - "

Her words were cut off when Draco slammed the door shut to his room. But not a moment later, he came back out with his wand in hand. Ignoring Pansy, he went to the coat rack, donned his Death-Eater robes and slipped on his mask. Then he apparated out of the apartment so quickly that Pansy almost

missed it.

"Did he go?"

Pansy turned around to face Blaise, who had poised the question. "Yes," she breathed, letting an expression of disbelief flit across her features briefly before she headed back to the bed, slipping under his arm like a mouse trying to burrow its way home.

"Told you he'd care," Blaise said triumphantly, tying the frayed ends of the Pansy's restraints back to the side of the headboard, before sliding over her in a movement as easy as breathing.

She smiled and latched her eager lips to his sweat-glazed neck. "I know he does," she murmured fondly against his skin, "it's just easy to forget, sometimes."

Draco was not surprised to see the stunned faces of the Death-Eaters when he got to the Quarry. Everyone had donned their masks, but the expression in their eyes was telling. Some looked awed, but the majority looked scared out of their wits. He let his cold, hardened eyes sweep across the lot slowly, enjoying the squirm he got out of at least two Death-Eaters, and the shudders of several others.

Finally, his eyes landed on the sub-head for the night's patrol, Augustus

Rockwood, who seemed to be on edge as he stared up at Draco. "G-good to see you, Malfoy," Rockwood practically stumbled over his words in an effort to sound as formal as he could. "I was expecting Theodore, but - "

"I'm in charge tonight," Draco said flatly, scanning the group again. "Has everyone been briefed?"

"Y-yes, sir - "

"Then there will be no room for mistakes." Draco surveyed the house just at the edge of the clearing. It looked as dilapidated as ever, but he knew it was just a façade. Everything, from the attic to the cellar and every floor in between would be swept clean tonight. "Let's begin."

He took the first step towards the house, and suddenly there were dusty sounds of apparitions around him, ahead of him, as the other Death-Eaters charged on silently. Draco followed at a more leisurely pace, taking the time to mentally curse Theo in his head. If it wasn't for that drunk bastard, he would've been - well, he didn't know what he would be doing, probably stuck staring up at the ceiling as usual, but it would've been better than being here anyway.

Realising that he was lagging behind the group, Draco quickly apparated to the basement of the building. He'd been in here several times before, back when there were more important leads and this

place had more chances of housing people worth capturing. But, lately, this place had been forgotten, like so many other places he knew.

The place was eerily silent as it always was, although he'd occasionally hear creaks from the floorboards echoing in the silence from the other Death-Eaters. Draco frowned at the noise, making a mental note to get Blaise to pass the feedback to them at a later date. Clunky footfalls might go unnoticed now, when he was the head of the patrol; but if the Dark Lord was leading, a little stealth might save many lives.

He wandered further into the basement, silently casting a Lumos spell on his wand. Then he saw them, the six

refugees - nothing but terrified eyes, bedraggled clothes and trembling in the farthest corner of the room. Draco stepped towards them calmly. They shrank farther back into the corner; one of the men spreading his arms out protectively as though to shield them all from the killing curse that could slip out from Draco's wand at any moment.

"Are there any more of you?" Draco asked instead, eyes sweeping shrewdly across the small huddled group.

Perhaps if he had not been watching closely, he would've missed it. But the youngest of the group, a young boy that didn't look much older than eight, slipped. The boy's eyes flickered briefly to the floorboards on the right, before

snapping back up to Draco. It was such a small, instinctive action that Draco almost didn't catch it.

But Draco did, and his grip tightened on his wand. He narrowed his eyes at the group and was just about to speak when someone from behind beat him to it.

"Over here!"

Yaxley. One of the other incompetent Death-Eaters, and Draco resisted the urge to let out an annoyed sigh.

Yaxley's eyes brightened at the sight of the refugees and he grinned, "you know, the werewolves are quite hungry this time of year."

The young boy flicked terrified eyes to Draco but Draco stared back evenly. "Where're the rest?" He asked Yaxley.

"Making their way down. You sure have the nose of a bloodhound for these things, Malfoy, always the first one on the scent - "

"Shove your flattery up someone else's arse, Yaxley, I haven't got all bloody day."

"Y-yes," Yaxley stammered, before raising his voice to yell at the Death-Eaters upstairs. "Hurry up!" Without waiting for the rest, he went over to the refugees and began to bind them tightly with his wand. The young boy cried out in pain as the ropes dug into his skin and Draco immediately cast a wordless silencing charm on him. The louder you resisted, the more it'd hurt. Death-Eaters simply thrived on fear.

By the time the rest of the group came swarming in, the look on Draco's face said it all - he was not happy with their tardiness. Some shivered at the frostiness in his expression, while the rest simply averted their eyes and quickly did the necessary steps to transport the captives to the cells in Godric's Hollow.

"You coming, sir?" Rockwood and the rest glanced over at him when they were finished. Draco had been hovering near the back of the group all this while, and he quickly snapped to attention when he realised that they were waiting for him to give the signal.

"No," said Draco, and he jerked his head for them to leave. "Get the hell out of

here. I want to do one last scout round this place."

Some of them gazed up at him in rapt admiration and Draco began to feel uncomfortable. He cleared his throat dryly and immediately, Rockwood and several others grabbed the prisoners and drew out their portkeys that would bring them immediately to Godric's Hollow. They vanished without another word, while the rest of lower ranks apparated themselves back home.

And then Draco was finally alone. He cast a quick Muffliato around, as well as a disillusionment charm to make the basement appear completely empty. Gripping his wand tight between his fingers, he stepped forward and tapped

the floorboards with his right foot.

"Is anyone down there?"

There was nothing but silence. Draco tried to remember where the young boy's eyes had previously flickered to, and took another step to the right. He tapped again with his foot.

"Hello?"

Still nothing. Draco crouched down this time, rapping the floorboards sharply with his knuckles.

"Anyone?"

The silence was eerie and ever present. Draco swore under his breath and stood up, brushing away the familiar sinking feeling in his heart as he did. Bloody kid. He never should've given a second thought to that young boy. He was

probably just trying to divert his attention, that's all.

Draco was just about to take a step back when a sudden, slight sound made him freeze. It was almost inaudible and he almost didn't catch it. A quiet, weak cry. And it came from the direction of the floorboards he'd been standing on.

Draco whipped round immediately and crouched down, sliding his palm of his hand briefly across the floorboards. He didn't know why he hadn't felt it before, hadn't felt it ever, but now he did. The slight tingle of magic, barely there and would go unnoticed he had been a lesser wizard. After a quick inspection, he realised that there were complicated locking charms on it.

But not complicated enough for him. He quickly undid them, remembering the way to redo them just in case. His heart was racing as he flicked his wand in haphazard directions. Two of the floorboards slid open with a weary groan.

And in the darkness, he finally found her.

Draco could've sworn his heart stopped beating for a moment or two. There was a short flight of stairs leading downwards, and he immediately descended it. A putrid smell hit him, so

strong he wanted to gag, but he didn't dare cast a spell to remove it. Not yet, at least. Not until he could confirm that she was the only one there.

But she was. After lighting his wand and glancing quickly around, he realised that there was no one else but her. She lay just inches away from the bottom step, her face flat against the floor, knotted hair covering her face, dressed in nothing but tattered rags. He paused, breath hitching in his throat and braced himself.

"Granger?"

The figure before him shifted. And then a tiny sound escaped her lips. "...Draco?"

Draco froze momentarily. It just seemed so surreal, so easy, and he couldn't

believe it had taken him three years to finally accomplish this. He quickly pushed his mask off his face, rushing down the last few steps before crouching down next to her.

"Granger." He pushed the hair out of her face, inhaling sharply when he finally saw her. "Fuck - "

Her features were almost unrecognisable, bruised and blistered beyond belief. One of her eyes was so bruised it hardly opened, while the other gazed up at him with barely a slit, the life in them so dwindled it almost seemed extinguished.

"Granger."

Her fingers immediately lifted from their sides, latching onto his arms in a weak

grip. "Draco," she whispered each word enunciated slowly, like she was having trouble even remembering how to speak.

"It's - it's really you?"

"Yes, yes, it's me," he rushed out, so relieved he momentarily forgot the normal coldness he'd always assumed. He let out a haggard breath when what seemed like her lips curled up in a fleeting smile. Her unbruised eye began to fall shut and he frantically reached out to grip her shoulder. "Granger, stay with me. I need to know when you last saw someone."

"Can't - can't tell how long it's...been."

"An approximation. I need to know, Granger."

She shifted slightly, her gritty fingers

sliding across her abdomen with slow, painful movements before landing on her rib. "This is...this was the last one - "

Draco didn't need any other explanations. He drew his wand over her ribs and prodded it, grimacing when he heard her whimper in pain. "Sorry," he grunted before doing a mental calculation in her head. Two weeks and counting. She'd gotten this injury for awhile now.

So it was safe. She was safe now. He lowered his head. "Just relax," he whispered, and reached for her hand, apparating the both of them back home.

It was ridiculous to take Hermione Granger to St. Mungo's, even though Draco knew that it was possibly the best decision. But it was also the stupidest decision, since the hospital was often infiltrated by Death-Eaters, who wanted to capture surviving members of the Order.

The safest place was still the apartment he shared with Theo, Pansy and Blaise. The only problem was keeping her away from them, and he didn't know how long that was going to take.

When Draco apparated back into the flat with Hermione in his arms, he immediately rushed into his room. With

his wand, he cast a silencing charm, sealing his door shut with intricate locks. She seemed startled, but he quickly pressed his finger to his lip. She seemed to calm down, but her fingers twitched, her arm lifting up slowly as she seemed to reach for him. There was nothing else Draco could do except to head straight for her, stiffening when her fingers latched around the edge of his jumper.

"Draco?" She rasped brokenly, his name a tired slur on her tongue. It seemed to take a herculean effort each time she spoke. "Is it - is it really you?"

Draco jaw clenched. "Yes, it's me," he murmured lowly, "but you have to keep quiet because no one knows you're

here."

With a huge effort, she nodded once and tried to curl her lips to smile at him. Draco flinched at the sight and stood up, but the moment he did, her fingers tightened their grip around the edge of his jumper.

"Don't go," she gasped, her unbruised eye widening in fear again. There was a slight unhinged look on her face, sheer panic and painful desperation. "Please, please don't - don't leave me - "

He shoved away the tightening feeling in his chest and gazed down at her, trying to avoid the rough scars and blisters on her body. "I'm just going to grab some healing potions. I'll be back before you know it." He tried to pull gently away

from her grasp, pausing when she began to shift, pushing herself up with agonising movements.

"Then I - I'll come with you - "

"Granger - " A tear trickled out from the corner of her bruised eye, and he drew in a shuddering breath. When had he ever seen Hermione Granger cry before? That's right - he hadn't. Because Hermione Granger never cried. "Fuck. Okay, fine, I'm not going anywhere - just lie back down."

"Thank you," she whispered, easing herself back down. But her fingers were still tight on his jumper and he knew he'd feel wretched if he tried to pull away again. Her face relaxed, but she kept one eye on him, and he tried to meet her gaze

without flinching.

"I'm going to cast some healing spells on you now," he told her quietly. "Just lie still and try not to make a sound."

She barely managed a nod, eye still staring fixedly at him. He promptly began, his wand taking a quick tour around her face, quickly determining the cause of each injury. He wasn't a healer by any means, but he knew the basics. Soon enough, her features were marginally better, save for certain swellings he knew would take time to go down, and the scars he knew wouldn't. Her face was still scattered with deep bruises, though, and if he weren't looking closely enough, he honestly didn't think he could recognise her at all.

Once done with her face, arms and legs - the parts of her body that were exposed, he drew back and scanned her briefly. Her hair was still terribly knotted; she reeked of rotting flesh and everything grotesque, despite his previous attempt to Scourgify the dirtiest parts of her body.

"Any internal injuries?" He asked, meeting her gaze and realising that she had been watching him all this while, without making a sound. "Does it hurt anywhere else?"

Her free hand, the one that hadn't latched onto him, drew over her abdomen and she pointed to various spots. With his wand, Draco detected broken ribs, and he healed them silently, trying not to

flinch when she whimpered in pain. "Better?" She nodded. "You still have to take some potions to heal the rest of it. Let me know if you feel anymore discomfort."

She shook her head, but tears seemed to prick the corner of her eyes and before he knew it, she was crying. Draco immediately tensed, casting another muffling charm, just in case. "Fuck. What did I say?"

"No - I just," she shuddered, passing her free hand across her eyes with tired movements. She was crying for reasons he would never understand - that much he knew. And frankly, he wasn't sure if he wanted to understand either.

Stifling a sigh, Draco stood up, pausing

when she her fingers tightened on his jumper again. "I'm going to get you some clothes," he met her gaze squarely. "You should take a bath."

She nodded mutely and pushed herself off the bed. He tried to ignore the fact that she never actually did let him go, shadowing him closely as he went to the wardrobe and pulled out an arbitrary shirt and boxer shorts. And even when he went into the bathroom, flipped on the lights and drew the bath with his wand, she still hovered behind him, reluctant to release her grip on him.

Draco spun round and tried to pry her fingers off his jumper. "You should - " he sighed when she let out a fearful whimper, staring up at him with

desperate brown eyes. "Granger, I'm not going anywhere."

"I-I know, I just - " her eyes swam with unshed tears and he mentally kicked himself for making her cry again, even though it had been completely unintentional.

He manoeuvred them so that he was sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, before drawing back the curtain and waving her in. "I'll be right out here."

Letting out a shaky breath, Hermione let go of him at last, and stepped towards the tub. Just before she got in, she threw another glance over her shoulder at him. Draco nodded. She climbed into the tub and he began to tug the curtain close but her muffled cry stopped him.

"Please don't. I-I need to - " she seemed to force the words past her lips. "I need to know you're there."

Draco sighed quietly and turned, so that his back was facing the tub. He couldn't see her, but she could see him. "Better?"
"Yes."

A moment later, he heard the sloshing sounds of water against the tub, accompanied by her stifled whimpers as she tried to clean herself. A part of him wanted to help but - no, he'd already done far too much tonight. Gone far beyond his call of duty and what for? Just to ease saint Potter's guilt. Well, that and his own too.

02 | rennervate

0 2

r e n n e r v a t e

Awakens victim.

When Hermione was finally done - which took a bloody long while, if he was being honest - he waited until he could feel her hovering behind him again, her fingers latching onto the sleeve of his jumper.

"You done?" He still didn't dare turn around.

"Y-yes," she breathed, and he tensed as he felt her breath a mere distance away from the nape of his neck. He stood up quickly, easing back from her when he realised that she was standing far too close to him.

She followed him out, and he cast a quick Scourgify to cleanse the filth and grime from his bed, before gesturing for her to sit. He stood while she sat, but her fingers never left him.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head. And then there was nothing else for him to say. His mind swarmed with questions, but all these could wait till tomorrow.

"Well, sleep then."

She didn't move. With a sigh, he flicked

his wand in the direction of his leather armchair, and brought it over to him. Then he settled down in it, pushing it right next to the bed.

"Go to sleep, Granger."

Seemingly satisfied, Hermione slowly eased herself back onto the bed. She drew the covers over herself with slow, punctuated movements. Then she curled onto her side, facing him, her fingers still tight on the edge of his jumper sleeve, her eyes fixed on his face.

Draco's eyes narrowed. "Sleep."

Her lips curved into a faint smile that lasted for a mere second or two. "Thank you, Draco," she whispered tiredly and her eyes fluttered shut.

Hearing his name on her lips was

thoroughly unfamiliar and Draco couldn't decide whether he liked or hated it. And he couldn't help but wonder why she called him that now, when she'd always referred to him as Malfoy before. The strangest thing was that she remembered him, actually remembered him, and treated him like she had been waiting for him for a long time now.

Like she had been searching for him just as much as he had been searching for her.

The nightmares began that very night.

Draco had been drifting fitfully between the realms of dream and reality, and he'd just allowed his eyes to fall shut when her fingers suddenly convulsed on his sleeve.

The mere movement alone was enough for him to surge up, grabbing the wand that he'd left on the nearby table and staring into the darkness with killer senses alert. Then his eyes drifted down when Hermione's fingers tugged on his sleeve again. Despite the fact that she had fallen asleep, he was surprised that she'd kept her fingers fisted tightly, never letting go once. At least, not that he knew of.

But then her face contorted in the darkness, and her eyes shot open. And

Draco had mere seconds to cast a quick Muffliato around the room before he was engulfed by terrified screaming.

He'd heard a lot of screams before. But none had ever sounded as terrifying as hers did.

Hermione began to thrash frantically on the bed. Some of her healed wounds started to bleed again as she knocked them against the headboard, or the wall. Her hands reached out to hit at an imaginary person and she bared her teeth, bracing herself for an attack as her subconscious conjured up her abductor.

Draco immediately sprang into action. Setting his wand aside, he hurled himself on the bed and gripped her arms tightly, swearing when she screamed even

louder and kicked him right in the gut.

"Granger. Granger, shut up!"

She didn't hear him. She choked and sobbed hysterically. And when her arm rose, he caught a glimpse of a familiar scar that had plagued him for nights back when the war had first begun.

M U D B L O O D

The words that Bellatrix had carved into her skin were faded but ever present, a stark contrast to her other scars and bruises, and he felt a shiver dash down his spine. Merlin, he hated himself for it and hated himself more now that he had

seen it.

But then her screams shook him out of his guilt-ridden reverie and he gazed down at her, flinching when one of her nails caught his cheek, her nail slicing clean off a bit of flesh. Where had she learnt to fight like that? And under what circumstances was she in to be forced to fight like that?

Draco dragged her arms down to his side and firmly straddled her, leaving her with no opportunity to kick at him with her legs. "Granger," he pinned her arms with his knees, reaching forward with his palms to slap lightly at her face. "Fucking wake up! Wake up!"

He had to hit her for several more times before her thrashing ceased. She

blinked, a shade of sanity slipping back into her vacant expression before her eyes latched onto his. "Draco?"

"Yes, it's me."

Her face crumpled with relief. "I-I - "

"You had a nightmare. It's over now," he said flatly, before getting off her. He grabbed his wand and began to mend her injuries, trying not to seem affected as she began to cry. The moment he was within reach of her, she reached out and grasped him again, fingers latching easily onto his sleeve.

"I'm so sorry," she choked, gazing up at him with familiar brown eyes. The eyes he'd always had haunting visions of, the eyes that had quickly become a fixture of his every nightmare and every pleasant

dream. She reached up with the other hand for his face. "I-I'm so sorry I hurt you. I didn't - I didn't mean to."

Draco found himself automatically leaning down to her. It seemed almost trance-like, her hand seemed to have a magnetic pull that gravitated him down to her. But then he froze before flinching away, settling safely down in his leather armchair again. "It's fine," he muttered, shaking his head in a vain attempt to assure her. "Go back to sleep. I'll get sleeping draughts for you tomorrow."

She nodded, staring up at him with all the apology in the world when it should've been him staring at her that way. Sliding her fingers past the sleeve of his jumper, she slipped them onto his

palm instead, curling round and gripping his hand tight. Then she turned on her side - towards him, always towards him - tucked their hands just next to her cheek, and closed her eyes.

Draco tried not to jump away. Instead, he spent the rest of the night relishing the pain she'd given him - the scratch on his cheek, the kick in his gut - and trying his best to tune out her soft sobs, and the way her tears left unforgiving stains on his hand.

When Hermione awoke the next

morning, the room was empty. She blinked for several long moments, trying to familiarise herself with the place that appeared completely foreign to her, but also had a fleeting semblance of familiarity that seemed to have been from a dream long ago. Her eyes flickered to the side. Saw the vacated leather armchair.

And, suddenly, everything was real.

With a horrified gasp, she shot up, ignoring the painful tremors that wracked through her body. Because Draco was not here, Draco was gone.

Draco had left.

His name was the only thing that was pulsating in her veins and swamping her mind. She choked back a sob and

stumbled out of the bed. Her legs immediately gave way and she collapsed onto the floor, but still she pushed herself towards the door.

"Draco," she gasped weakly, ignoring the tears streaming down her cheeks. Bringing her fists up, she reached for the doorknob, but found herself unable to grasp it. So she pounded against the door, clamping down on the hysteria that threatened to rise through her, but it was too late, it was far too late. "Draco, Draco - "

The door clicked open and she was shoved to the side as a familiar figure slid in. And then she saw him - every bit of his face that she had yearned for; his snowy hair falling into his eyes, the

elegant refined cheekbones and slope of his nose, and the hard line of his lips that could never, ever seem cruel to her.

His warm silver eyes flickered towards her, and they widened. "For Merlin's sake," Draco swore, immediately directing the tray over to the table with a hand before casting a quick Muffliato around the room. Then he slammed the door shut and knelt down beside her. "What are you - "

But he never managed to finish the sentence, because Hermione had practically thrown herself into his arms. She could feel him tense; arms freeze awkwardly by his side as she fisted his jumper between her fragile fingers and sobbed openly into his chest.

She thought she had lost him again, you see. She really thought she had.

"Granger." She revelled in his harsh breaths that tickled the tiny hairs on her forehead, because it made her feel alive. "You thought I fucking up and left, didn't you?"

When she didn't answer and continued to sob, more silently this time, he sighed and picked her up. She could feel him place his arms gingerly around her, looping them around her knees and behind her back. Then he was crossing the room, laying her down gently on the bed. Hermione stared up at him and tried to convey how sorry she was without words. Because words just didn't come easy to her anymore.

"I didn't leave," Draco said quietly, settling down on the leather chair. His eyes flickered down to where she kept a firm grip on his arm, and she tightened her fingers further. "I just went to get some food and medicine for you. I wouldn't leave, Granger, this is my place."

Her eyes widened and she suddenly felt her windpipe clog. "M-Malfoy Manor? We-we're in - "

"No. We're in London." He didn't seem to be able to meet her eyes and Hermione wondered if he was feeling guilty. She wished he wouldn't. "This place - it's a shared apartment, so you'll have to be quiet at all times."

"Shared?" Hermione rasped weakly,

struggling to sit up when he lifted a hand, bringing the tray over. Her stomach immediately rumbled at the sight of food - a questionable looking brown porridge that smelled a little bit funny, but she couldn't complain.

Draco sighed. "Theodore Nott, Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini all live here," his silver eyes studied her solemnly, seeming to gauge her expression but Hermione was silent. Their names were but vague, almost non-existent inklings to her and she could hardly even remember how they looked like. She'd forgotten so many faces since then.

"I mean it, Granger," Draco pressed, when she didn't say anything. "You can't

make a noise. They're all Death-Eaters like me. If anyone of them knows - "

"They wouldn't," she swore quickly, hardly wanting to contemplate the alternative. Of being sent back. Wherever. Without him. Her grip instinctively tightened on his arm and she dug her nails into him. "I-I will be quiet, I promise, just please don't - "

Leave me, she wanted to finish, but he had cut in before she could. "How're your bruises today?"

"Better," she tried to smile at him but her lips ached and she could feel one of the healed seams splitting if she stretched her lips too much. Draco immediately noticed and with a wave of his wand, the flaming wound ceased to hurt. "Thank

you."

"And your ribs?"

"They're okay." They weren't. But she didn't want him to worry, not when he had already done so much for her. She tried to sit up to show him that she was fine, but winced when her ribs began to ache.

His gaze narrowed. Without another word, he flicked his wand and her shirt rose up slightly. Hermione immediately drew her free arm around her abdomen to hide the ugly bruises and scars. But with another flick of his wand, her arm was back by her side.

"You've gotten better at this," she murmured tiredly, lips curling in soft amusement and awe. Mostly awe. The

last time they had met, her skills far surpassed his. Now, she wasn't even sure if she could remember how to use magic anymore. And he seemed like a first-rate wizard to her, who knew wordless magic and wandless magic and had a heart of gold.

"Practice," Draco returned simply, touching the tip of his wand to her bruises.

A soft blue glow flickered against her skin and instantly, the raging tremors inside ceased. She sighed in relief. There were still several other sources of discomfort that she desperately wanted healed. But she didn't want him to worry, nor did she want him to leave her side to find potions to help her.

"Now drink these," he directed, levitating the tray just above her and pointing to the small phials on it.

Hermione reached up with her free arm and took one of the phials. But to pop the cap off required both hands and she didn't want to let go of Draco. She tried to remove the cap with one hand instead. Draco sighed, this time sounding far less tired and more amused. Grabbing the tray, he set it on his lap and uncapped the phial before handing it to her. Hermione quietly drank. She drank them all without saying a word, even though some tasted horrible. But nothing as horrible as she had experienced thus far, so she couldn't complain. She would never complain. She ate the porridge obediently, the

spoon in her hand and the bowl resting in his. He waited patiently for her to finish every bit of it, easing her back into the bed and drawing the covers over her merely by with a wave of his hands.

She watched him without a sound, studying his face and finding solace in the fact that she'd remembered him fairly well. The war had obviously not been kind to him, if the bags under his eyes were any indication. But he'd certainly grown into his features - a stronger jawline, broader shoulders and the distinguished, aristocratic air that made him unmistakable. She could find his face in a million others, she was sure of it.

"Granger," she hadn't realised he was

speaking until he frowned.

Blinking, she shook the thoughts from her head and focused on him. "Yes?"

"I said - you have to let me go, sometimes."

She went rigid at his words.

"I'm not going to leave," he hastened to assure her. "But I have to be at work and I have other obligations to fulfil. From eight to eight, sometimes later. You understand, don't you?"

Tears sprung to her eyes. She understood, she really did, and she didn't want to be such a burden on him. But it was just so so difficult. She couldn't imagine being alone again, with nothing but the walls closing in on her and her thoughts pushing their way out from

within.

"Granger?"

She swallowed and tried to focus on his voice but their voices were getting louder and louder. And she could hear it all, Crucio, Crucio, Crucio...

"Fuck. Granger," her eyes flew open when she felt a familiar warmth grip her shoulders. She hadn't even realised her eyes were closed. "Look at me," he whispered harshly, his silvery gaze pinning her down. She nodded and felt their voices fade as she stared up at him.

"I will not leave you. Not again. I will always come back for you. And even if I'm late, you must remember that you're safe here. You understand?"

Somehow, that word seemed flimsy with

the prospect of the war going around them. But she latched onto it all the same and felt a warmth spread through her as she repeated the word in her head. "Safe?"

"Yes, safe," he repeated firmly, even though it seemed like he was trying to convince himself just as much as her. After hesitating for a moment, he reached up. His fingers clasped around a chain she hadn't even realised he had, and pulled it over his neck, handing it to her. "See this?"

She took it wordlessly, even though his fingers seemed reluctant to let it go. The chain was a thin, almost inconspicuous silver that held strong and unbreakable. There were three tiny sturdy silver

phials hanging at the bottom. They hardly weighed anything at all.

"These phials hold memories," Draco said quietly. "Memories belonging to Snape, my mother and my father respectively. I've viewed two of them, except for my father's."

Hermione's eyes flickered to his. She noticed the pain behind his shuttered expression, behind the indifferent demeanour that he believed he'd perfected so well. But she was an expert at pain, and she saw it all, clear as the bright morning sun.

Draco reached forward and undid the clasp. He pulled out the phial belonging that held his father's memories, and held it out to Hermione. "Keep this."

Hermione held her breath. She knew how much it meant to him. "What?"

"You keep this. Because it's the only one I haven't viewed yet, and I'll have to come back for it. So you don't have to worry about me leaving forever."

Tears sprung to Hermione's eyes again, but these were hardly devastated ones. A shudder wracked through her and she had never felt happier before. She didn't even recall ever feeling happy before this. Clutching the phial tight against her chest, she squeezed her eyes shut for a brief moment before opening them again. She realised that he was watching her carefully, a sombre expression on his face.

"Thank you," she whispered and smiled

tiredly at him.

He nodded and slipped the chain around his neck again. Then he leaned back against the armchair, but didn't bother pulling his hand back from her. "Go to sleep, Granger. I'm off work for the rest of the day, and I'll be here when you wake up."

She choked back a grateful sob and closed her eyes.

Draco tried hard not to swear when the front door slammed shut that evening. Hermione jolted awake with horrified

eyes, but one look in his direction and the terror dissipated to a calmer but ever present fear.

He cast another Muffliato and drew himself up, shaking his head when she began to push herself up. "It's Theo and the others," he told her quietly. "Stay here. I won't be long." Hermione took a shuddering breath and he pointed at the phial still clasped tightly in her other hand, giving her a firm look. "I still need that. Don't lose it."

Somewhere in the more rational part of her brain, Hermione knew that his demand was just to ease her greatest fears. She couldn't possibly lose it in such a short time span. But she focused on his words nonetheless, and drew the

phial to her chest, turning on her side and hugging it tightly in her grasp.

I must not lose it, she thought to herself. She stared fixedly at the silver object, holding back a whimper when Draco gently eased away her hand. She tried not to cry when he headed to the door, casting another reassuring glance at her over his shoulder.

He pointed at the phial again and she nodded.

Draco quickly left, shutting the door gently behind him and sealing it with his usual locks. Then he shuffled towards the living room, pretending like he'd just gotten out of bed.

"Mate," it was Theo, and he looked extremely pleased to see him. Leaving Pansy and Blaise to set the table, he rushed to Draco and clapped him briefly on his back, ignoring the way Draco tensed and flinched away. "Thanks for last night."

Pansy's eyebrows shot up and she set the plates down. "What did the two of you do last night?" She asked suggestively. Blaise chuckled beside her.

"You know what I meant," Theo scowled at the couple. "The patrol at the Quarry. The Dark Lord was happy with the results, by the way," he told Draco, before grimacing. "Fuck, did I just use 'the Dark Lord' and 'happy' in the same bloody sentence?"

"You also shagged Draco last night. So clearly we are living in a parallel universe," Blaise commented dryly, before beckoning them to the table.

"We didn't shag, you little shit. Anyway, the refugees captured were, apparently, going to join the Order. So that's six less members of the Order to worry about - according to the Dark Lord. Yeah, Greyback and his cronies are going to have a wonderful feast tonight," Theo smirked at the nauseated expression on Blaise's face, as well as the unsettled one of Pansy's. Only Draco was indifferent, as usual, as he scooped the food that they had brought back onto his plate.

"Did we learn anything?"

Theo shrugged at Draco's calm question. "I used Cruciatus on them. Apart from the fact that they had stayed at the Quarry for the past week, and were waiting to be rescued by saint Potter? Nothing. Unexpectedly silent bunch, including the kid."

"Did you - "

"Yeah, I erased their memories before sending them off. At least they won't be screaming out any secrets when they're being shredded to bits by werewolves."

"And - that's all for dinner tonight," finished Blaise, pushing his plate away and looking rather green in the face. "Thanks a lot, Theo."

"You're bloody welcome, Blaise."

Draco watched as Blaise disappeared

into the room he shared with Pansy. He knew that Blaise had a low threshold for things like these, which was why being a Death-Eater proved to be harder for him than any of the other three of them. Thank Merlin Draco had mastered a numbing spell ages ago and had taught it to all of them. Blaise always had it cast on him, or cast it on himself, before he went out for a mission, and it had proved to be thoroughly effective so far.

In fact, Blaise, Theo and Pansy were all used it now. It dulled their emotions, closed them off to other people's hurt, until they felt nothing but calmness, like the best kind of aphrodisiac there ever was. It was only when they removed the spell after their missions when the guilt

hit, and it hit hard.

Draco knew, because he'd been through that before. And because the number of killings he had was more than all three of theirs combined, the guilt was crushing when it came all at once.

And so he refused the spell, preferring to feel the guilt like an aching, tired hole in his gut that gnawed at him constantly. Besides, nothing else could ever, ever, make him feel as guilty as when he looked at Hermione Granger's face.

Fuck. Granger. He had to get back to her now.

"Draco?"

Pansy's voice shook him from his thoughts, and he glanced over at her. She was already sitting at the table and

eating with Theo. She stared at him, her gaze shrewd. Out of the three, Pansy was the one he had to worry about the most when it came to hiding Hermione. Nothing ever escaped her eyes.

"What?"

She shook her head at him. "I asked, how are you feeling? You said you couldn't come to work today and when I told the Dark Lord, he seemed rather worried."

Theo sputtered dramatically on his food. "First pleased, and now worried? Could this be the day? Could the Dark Lord actually be showing actual, human emotions?"

"I suppose so, especially when it comes to his favourite Death-Eater," Pansy smirked knowingly at Draco. "He even

Crucio'd Theo because it was Theo's mission and you had to cover for him. The Dark Lord thought last night's trip made you ill."

Draco's eyes flickered to Theo, but Theo shrugged. "One Cruciatus curse. It was fine, mate, serves me right for getting drunk."

But the tired, aching hole in Draco's gut gnawed at him again and he cast a frosty glare at Pansy. "I told you or Blaise to go."

"I know," and now Pansy sounded contrite. She reached over and pulled Theo into a quick hug. "Sorry, Theo, and I apologise on Blaise's behalf. I'll make it up to you somehow."

"You could take those twins out," Theo

smirked suggestively at Pansy, who glared evenly back at him, crossing her arms protectively over her chest.

"Sure, let me just tell Blaise first. Blaise, baby?"

"Alright, alright, nevermind," Theo scowled in defeat, knowing when he was well and truly beaten. "Keep your bloody knickers on, woman - unless you're not wearing any."

"Blaise, baby, would you come out here please?"

Draco ignored the chatter before him and finished heaping his plate with food - making sure to take more than his usual but not too much to raise suspicions. He turned to return to his room, but was stopped when Pansy called his name.

"Aren't you going to eat out here with us?"

"Still feel like shit," Draco mumbled and headed quickly back into his room.

Theo and Pansy exchanged glances. Pansy's was weary. Theo was simply confused. "You think he's really ill?"

"Of course not," Pansy returned promptly, and picked up her fork. "I think it gets too much for him some days. Today's one of those days."

"Hopefully he doesn't die on us," Theo tried to sound cavalier, but Pansy could hear the tremor in his voice. And she knew better than anyone that if Draco ever did die, Theo would be the most wrecked up about it.

"He wouldn't," she said, more

confidently than she really felt. "He's got a reason to live. We all do."

03 | muffliato

0 3

m u f f l i a t o

Muffles sound.

Draco returned to the bedroom, only to find that his presence had been clearly and sorely missed. Hermione's eyes were bloodshot in her attempt to keep from crying, but clearly it wasn't working because her shoulders were shaking as she curled in a foetal position, clasping her hands tightly together in front of her chest. She was murmuring to herself silently, her lips

were moving but there was no sound.

When Draco shut the door, she immediately glanced over, relief visibly washing over her face. He pressed a finger to his lips and she nodded fervently, pressing the back of her hand to her lips to stifle the sobs. Still, it wasn't good enough and he cast a Muffliato again, because the charm wore off from time to time and he didn't want to take any chances.

He went over and settled down in the leather armchair. He didn't even flinch when she took the sleeve of his jumper and pushed herself upright, lifting her other hand towards him.

"I-I kept it for you," she whispered, smiling weakly as she opened her palm

to reveal the tiny phial. "I kept it safe."

Draco nodded and took it from her, slipping it into the pocket of his sweatpants. "Here," he held out the plate to her. "Eat as much as you can."

She picked up the spoon hesitantly, still keeping her other hand on his sleeve. "What a-about you?"

"There's more food outside, I'll get it in awhile."

Her eyes widened, her fingers tensed on him. "No. We can share. Please."

Draco met her hazel-coloured eyes, felt guilt kick in, and nodded. "Fine. But you have to eat until you're properly full."

Hermione nodded eagerly and picked up the spoon, digging into the food.

Later that night, Draco eased himself away from Hermione's grasp. He picked up the telephone from his bedside drawer, magically lengthened the cord and dragged it into the bathroom. Once the door was closed and the muffling spell cast, he leaned against the counter and dialled a familiar number, one that he had called so many times before.

After exactly three rings, the other person picked up. "Password, please."

"Dromeda, it's me."

"Oh," Andromeda Tonks sounded relieved and far happier. Then she asked worriedly, "Draco, is anything the

matter?"

"I found her."

A startled pause.

"What?"

"I found Granger," he said lowly, wincing when he heard her joyous gasp.

"Don't tell anyone about it - you understand what we talked about before."

"Yes - of course, I...are they true?"

"She is - " Draco trailed off, hardly wanting to worry his aunt but not wanting to undermine Hermione's injuries either. He didn't want Andromeda happily whisking Hermione off to saint Potter. Not just yet. " - she isn't well."

Andromeda let out a long sigh from the

other end. "I feared so. But she is finally safe with you now. Draco, this is marvellous and I am so proud of you - "

"Save the sentiment for some other time, Dromeda," Draco sniped and he could hear his aunt let out a soft chuckle of amusement. "I'm in a bit of a spot right now. You remember that house in the Quarry?"

"Yes, the place you searched for ages some months back. Did you find her there?"

"Along with six other refugees -

"Are they - "

" - Greyback and his werewolves finished them off," Draco said shortly, ignoring the whimper that left his aunt's lips. "Granger was in a secret room

below the basement. Her most recent injuries are a month old, but the refugees were only there for a week or so. I'm suspecting that whoever kept her there does check up on her. I made a mistake when I took her away right on the night I was patrolling - "

"You need a cover," Andromeda finished sombrely. "I understand."

"Preferably some traitor of the Order, maybe one whose mind's been fucked with or Imperiused so he can't weave a proper alibi. And keep in mind that the time frame can't be either yesterday or today. I can't have anyone pinning their bloody suspicions on me."

"Yes, of course, I'll get someone to see to it."

But there was a pause, and Draco knew that his Aunt was wrecking herself with newfound guilt. "Dromeda, this is on me. My mistake. You're just doing what you have to do so you can save me. And Granger."

"Yes - yes, you and Granger, of course..."

"One scapegoat in exchange for Potter's best friend. Sounds like a bloody good deal, so cheer up, 'Dromeda.'"

Andromeda laughed now and Draco was suddenly reminded of how similar she sounded to his mother. Their laughs were similar; the same pleasant, rich tones. "Oh, Draco, you do know how to humour your old Aunt."

"One of my many talents. Gotta ring off

now. Keep this between us, will you? I'm afraid the bloody Order isn't ready to know about this yet."

"Yes, I understand - and you're right, they're not. Thank you for finding Hermione, and please take good care of her."

Guilt seized his chest again. "You don't have to remind me."

"Well, you know me, I'm an old nag that way. And Draco?"

"Stay safe?"

"Always."

In spite of himself, Draco smirked briefly in the dark. "You too," he said, and rang off. He paused and leaned against the bathroom counter for a moment. When he stared into the mirror,

he almost winced at the exhausted-looking bruises under his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he had a good sleep.

Then again, there was a war raging on. And during a war, hardly anyone ever slept.

With a sigh, Draco pushed himself off the counter and went back to the bed, only to find Granger in a sitting position. She was sobbing silently with her knees pulled to her chest and he mentally kicked himself for not coming out sooner.

"Granger."

At the sound of her voice, her head snapped up and she immediately lunged towards him. Only her legs were weak

and she almost sprawled ungainly onto the ground. Draco immediately caught her before she could fall off the bed, dropping the telephone in the process so that he could wrap his arms around her to break the fall. It crashed onto the floor but he hardly cared, because the muffling charms he'd placed earlier were strong enough to hold.

"I-I'm sorry," she sobbed, clutching desperately onto the thin white shirt he wore. He knew that there'd be crinkles because of her tight grip, but right now, that was the least of his problems. "I didn't mean to - to cry, but I just - "

"Not your fault, Granger." Draco lifted her up easily and eased her back down onto the bed. He drew the covers over

her with a flick of his wrist again, settling down onto the armchair beside her. But she didn't sleep. Instead, she simply stared up at him with fearful eyes; fear not directed at him, but by the thoughts that probably plagued her all the time.

"Nightmare?"

She nodded, slipping her hand into his again and pressing it against her cheek. He tried to ignore the warmth of her skin and her shallow breaths on his skin, dangerously delicious as that felt. "This one wasn't - wasn't too bad - it was just... sad, so I woke up crying. I-I have plenty others, some more...horrifying than others but always centered around - around the same person."

Draco tried to resist, but curiosity killed the cat.

"Who?"

She looked taken aback for a moment. Then she cast her eyes down, shifting her head back onto the pillow and staring fixedly at their interlaced hands. And when she spoke, her voice was so soft he almost didn't catch it.

"You."

Draco stood next to the Dark Lord the next day, watching blankly as the Dark Lord marked several new Death-Eaters. Most of them hardly looked a day over

eighteen. Some looked terrified, others smirking with joy.

Walden MacNair stood at the Dark Lord's other side, reading out loud from a book of regulations that Draco had made awhile ago. Regulations that kept all the Death-Eaters in line and aided the Dark Lord in all his conquests around the world, enforcing only the strictest sort of security and the most painful of punishments to whomever disobeyed.

Bellatrix stood beside Draco, letting out cackles of laughter at the new recruits. Draco had cast a calming charm on her that morning, because he wasn't sure if the Dark Lord would appreciate her antics of insanity on such a formal occasion such as this. So she was silent,

save for the maniacal laughter that spilled from her lips every so often. It annoyed the hell out of Draco, but it was better than watching Bellatrix lick the blood of prisoners off her wand.

Draco tuned her out; letting his mind drift to the conversation he and Hermione had just the previous night. His jaw clenched as he remembered how she told him that he was the fixture of every nightmare - horrifying or devastating - that she had whenever she closed her eyes.

"No, don't - don't take this the wrong way!" Hermione had said, right when he began to draw back from her. "P-please listen. You are never, never evil in my dreams."

Draco had paused, hardly wanting to meet her eyes.

Hermione simply grasped his hand tightly. "You are always good, Draco."

He lifted his eyes to hers unsurely and she smiled, in spite of the split lip, which he hastily grabbed his wand to heal.

"You are always, always good," she pressed her cheek against his hand and let her eyes fall shut.

And he had watched her fall asleep, watched as the furrow between her eyebrows eased off and vanished. Watched the slow rise and fall of her shoulders. Watched her mumble slurred words in her sleep and, every so often, his name.

Draco was pulled out of his little reverie when Bellatrix's laugh interrupted him. And when she cackled again, Draco hit her with a silencing charm. And then she was laughing to herself noiselessly. The Dark Lord glanced over his shoulder at Draco, who simply shrugged.

"It wasn't a fucking comedy, my lord."

The Dark Lord lips curled in what seemed like a smirk of amusement, satisfaction evident in his eyes. As MacNair resumed his reading, the Dark Lord continued to put his mark on the new recruits. There were only three more to go, and Draco couldn't wait for it to be over and done with, so he could rush back home.

To her. To Hermione.

A sudden, muffled whimper slipped past the lips of the current recruit. And everyone suddenly froze, the room going completely silent, focusing on the young girl who had not held her tongue when she should have.

The Dark Lord took a step forward, pinning the recruit with his snake-like eyes. "What was that?"

"I - " the terror in the girl's eyes reminded him of Hermione. Thank Merlin her eyes were a pale blue and not the shade of hazel that Granger's was. " - my lord, I - "

"Draco," the Dark Lord glanced at his right-hand man. "Did you hear that?"

Draco eyes narrowed at the girl. "The very sound of cowardice, my lord."

"So my ears had not tricked me. Unfortunately," the Dark Lord paused, letting the deadly truth sink in as he stared at the girl, "you have. Draco?"

Draco took several slow steps forward, and within those moments, he took the chance to hit the girl with a silent *Impedimenta*, rooting her in spot. Then he used *Legilimency* on her, letting his mind quickly absorb her memories before drawing out the wand from his pocket. He forced himself to meet her eyes and knew that he'd see the frozen terror in them when he closed his eyes that night.

Then he pointed the tip of his wand to her heart.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

Hermione had had a horrible day. Draco had woken her at seven when he brought breakfast into the room, and let her hold his hand while she ate with the other.

After that, he'd told her that she could read anything she wanted from his vast library, watch anything she wanted on the television, and do anything she fancied, so long as she didn't leave the room. He placed extra charms on the door, just in case, and left sandwiches for her in case he couldn't return in time for lunch, before making her drink a sleeping draught.

"Look after this for me," he had told her,

pointing to the phial she was grasping in her left hand, while her right hand lingered reluctantly on the sleeve of his jumper. "I mean it, Granger. This is one of the most important things to me."

"I will," she promised resolutely, her voice barely a whisper.

He glanced round the room. She didn't know if she was overthinking it, but was he just as reluctant to leave as she was to see him leave?

After a moment's hesitation, he headed to his dresser. Hermione followed. He rummaged through it for awhile before finding what he wanted. When he leaned back up, Hermione's eyes widened when she saw another wand.

"Just in case," he murmured, placing it

gently in her hands, along with a scribbled piece of paper. "If anything should happen, tap the phial three times before saying that incantation. Others phials like it will heat up and help will come."

"Other - other phials?"

He surprised her by winking swiftly. "You're not the only one who knows how to cast a Protean charm, Granger."

Her eyebrows knitted. "A p-protean charm?"

Draco's light expression immediately darkened, and he drew back from her, studying her face with stormy grey eyes. "Stay safe, Granger."

She reluctantly let him go, stifling the tiniest whimper that escaped her lips.

"G-goodb - "

Draco shook his head before she could finish the word. "I'll see you soon, Granger."

Hermione remembered his words when she woke up three hours later. She didn't know how soon Draco meant, but she hoped it would be soon.

Without him, her mind started to flood and she could feel herself losing grip on her sanity. It wasn't the kind where she couldn't tell who she was and forgot everything else; it ran more along the lines of slow desperation, the kind that seized her and made her cry uncontrollably, for reasons she simply couldn't explain. The kind that made her physically ache, even though no one was

using the Cruciatus curse on her.

She thought of touching the phial with her wand. It would light up and he would return. Draco would return.

Or maybe not. Somewhere in her subconscious, she remembered that he'd told her there were other phials. And the sly glint in his eyes made her realise that he wasn't talking about the other two he had with him.

Hermione didn't think she would like seeing anyone else other than Draco.

When the next hour ticked by and Draco still didn't return, Hermione let out a raw sob and hid the clock in the bathroom, turning on the tap to drown out the sounds of the ticking. She then grabbed the jumper he'd carelessly tossed over

the armchair that morning before he'd changed into his black suit. The green knitted fabric smelled of him, a faint citrus and a trace of something else that was purely him. She clutched it to herself, inhaling deeply and trying not to stain it with her tears. His name became a mantra on her lips as she whispered the syllables over and over again, reminding herself that this was how she had stayed sane all this while.

Sometime later, Hermione heard the front door click open. She began to cry again, this time with relief, and half-crawled, half-dragged herself towards the door. She tried to stay as silent as she could, pressing the back of her hand against her lips to muffle the noises she

made. She still had Draco's phial in one hand, his jumper in the other.

"Bloody brilliant performance, mate," she heard someone say from outside. It wasn't Draco's voice. "I have to give it to you. No wonder you're the favourite."

"Pansy, get him a phial, quickly," another voice directed. This one was calm, and she felt marginally soothed by the sound of it.

"Don't rush me - " a feminine voice this time.

The first voice sniggered. "Is that what you always do to her in bed, Blaise?"

"Shut up, Theo...so Draco, did you see anything?"

"Of course I did, why did you think I rushed back for?"

And Hermione felt a huge weight lifted off her and she smiled through her tears. Draco. He was back, he was here. She pressed her ear against the door, glad that his muffling charm had begun to wear off because now she could hear everything clearly.

"Okay, found it!" Pansy cried, and Hermione heard faded thuds as Pansy supposedly ran across the room back to them.

There was a silence, where all Hermione heard was the sound of her own haggard breathing. Then Draco spoke again, and all the air seemed to rush back in.

"Take it then."

"Yeah, yeah. I swear to Salazar you're -

"

But Theo's voice suddenly faded out completely. And then the door clicked open softly and in stepped Draco. His silver eyes flickered down to her as he shut the door behind him. He lowered himself so that he could get a better look at her, his lips forming the syllables of her name. "Granger."

Hermione immediately broke down. Letting out a strangled sob, she reached forward to grip the lapels of his suit and dragged herself towards him. She felt Draco's arms encircle her, his staggered breaths against her hair and palms carefully ghosting her spine in slow, concentric circles. "Draco," she whispered, and inhaled shakily, thinking

of nothing else but him. "Draco."

"Yes, it's me, Granger," he murmured. "I told you I'd see you soon, didn't I?"

"Yes," she smiled through her tears and thought that she had never felt happier before. "Yes, you did."

04 | confundo

0 4

c o n f u n d o

Produces confusion.

Draco didn't leave Hermione for the rest of the day except to get dinner. She made him remove the Muffliato charm so she could hear the conversation outside, because just hearing his voice made her feel a lot calmer and it was the next best option if she couldn't be by his side.

"Oi, Draco."

Theo. Hermione had quickly learnt to identify her three neighbours. Their

voices were vaguely familiar - vaguely, but she had been tortured so much she couldn't remember clearly anymore.

"You up for a drink tonight? I'll even introduce you to some of my favourite slags."

Hermione froze at Theo's offer. Her breath caught in her throat. "Please don't go, please don't go, please don't go," she whispered, pressing her palms flat against the door. She didn't think she could handle another few hours without Draco.

"Theo, could you not make it sound as though you run an illegal brothel?" Blaise. Hermione was quick to deduce that he was more or less the father figure in this household, even though from what

little she could remember, Blaise was not much older than she was. "And Draco's probably going to wallow in his room, right, mate?"

"Zabini one, Nott zero."

Hermione exhaled in relief.

"Alright, alright, I got it. Just don't be too hard up on yourself, Draco, you know that girl was going to be dead either way."

Hermione froze again.

"Theo - "

"What, Pansy? You know we were all thinking the same thing. If it wasn't you, mate, then it'd be any of us. Probably me - I'd have to drag her down to the bloody cell and use the Cruciatus on - "

"Shut up, Nott." Draco's voice was

deadly. Hermione heard the sound of a chair being pushed back roughly, along with some shuffling sounds.

"You happy now, Theo?" Pansy sounded exasperated.

"What? What did I say - "

Theo's voice faded out as the muffling charm was placed. Moments later, the door slid open. Hermione didn't move, not even as Draco stepped in and locked the door behind him. But she automatically reached for him, and he obligingly let her catch onto his sleeve. Draco set the plate of food down a safe distance away and he sat down beside her, leaning against the door. His silver eyes were shuttered in the moonlight that seeped through the windows.

"Granger, I - "

And then there were simply no words, because how could you excuse yourself when you murdered in cold blood?

Hermione jerked alert at the tone of his voice. She studied his side profile for a moment, soaking in his defined features, the high cheekbones and straight nose, the dim light from outside casting beautiful shadows against his face.

Carefully, Hermione stole closer to him. She held her breath as she shifted up on her knees and reached for him. Not the sleeve of his jumper this time, but his face. She let her palm settle against his skin, felt his warmth beneath her fingertips. She watched as his eyelids fluttered shut and he seemed to lean into

her touch involuntarily, letting out a heavy breath as he did.

"You are a good person," she whispered. "I believe that."

Draco's eyes opened and she wanted to cry because they seemed so empty. "I'm not. None of us here are. What Theo said - " he swallowed, the next words seemed so painful to get out. " - that was true; we do use the Cruciatus curse. We use every Unforgivable curse, Granger, and we use it on a daily basis."

Hermione faltered and rested back on her haunches shakily. "What Theo said - about the Cr-cruciatus - "

"Not on you," Draco met her gaze squarely. "Never on you."

"Okay, then."

Hermione felt a wave of relief wash over her. She could live with that. She could live with four Death-Eaters who used the Unforgivables on a daily basis, because they had never and would never use it to hurt her. The war had dragged on for so long and she knew there were too many shades of grey to simply dismiss anyone and everyone who did something bad.

Draco resided in the darkest shade of grey but to her, he had always been good. Not from the moment they met, of course - in the haziest recesses of her memory, she remembered a snooty good-looking blond haired boy who taunted her and tormented her during her school days. But he'd grown and matured

exponentially since then and during her days in captivity, his was the face that she held on to.

Draco was the thread that linked her to sanity.

"It's alright," Hermione spoke slowly, trying to keep her phrases strung together cleanly, without stumbling on her words. "Draco." His eyes flickered to hers and she smiled softly. "Whether in my dreams, or in real life, you are always, always good. Never forget that."

Draco woke up when Hermione had another nightmare that night. Fortunately, the charms held and her screams were

confined to their room. Her howls of torment petrified him and made his chest tighten painfully. Instead of straddling her this time, Draco tried for something different.

Grasping tighter onto the hand that held his despite her constant thrashing, he reached forward and held the side of her face with his other hand. "Granger."

"No, please, don't, please, I'll tell you anything - anything you want, I just cannot, not right now, I cannot remember, please, please, don't - "

Draco stared down at her with fear in his eyes. Hermione was completely coherent in her dreams, her usual stuttering faded out, and she sounded so much, so much like the girl he had heard

when Bellatrix carved the word Mudblood on her skin. Back when she was still lucid and focused on her mission with Potter and the fucking Weasel.

But what had happened along the way? Draco had his suspicions. Hermione had endured so many months of torturing that even Bellatrix's words were faded out with new bruises and scars. But could months of the Cruciatus curse and constant torture wipe out her memory completely?

Or, maybe, something else.

Draco snapped back to attention when Hermione aimed a particularly nasty punch to his chest. He quickly gripped her shoulders and shook her. "Granger,

wake up!"

"Please, please don't, I'm begging you - "

"Granger!"

Hermione's eyes slowly fluttered open, her breathing slowing gradually. Then the expression on her face became lucid as her eyes latched onto him. "Draco?"

"Yes, I'm here."

Her lips curled into a weak smile.

"Thank Merlin." Her hands slid up, and he stiffened when she cupped his cheeks.

He felt an uncontrollable spasm in his lower abdomen as she sighed softly, her breath tickling his skin, and she stroked his cheeks with the pads of her thumbs.

"I - "

"Sleep, Granger."

She nodded. He couldn't quite push

away the feeling of disappointment when she returned her hands back to her sides, but her fingers laced through his nonetheless and she pulled it close to her chest, turning to lie in a foetal position again. He returned to the chair, watching her eyes slowly flutter shut and a dreamy smile gloss over her lips briefly. Sweet dreams, Granger.

Draco kept his eyes and ears alert for any signals that Granger's missing presence had been noticed. But there was none. He figured just as much. He didn't know who Granger's abductors were - he'd never managed to figure it

out, even after three years - but he knew for a fact that the Dark Lord hadn't a clue, and so this was probably an illegal job. The Dark Lord would have their heads if he knew that they had kept and tortured Granger without letting him know. Without letting Draco know.

The fucking nerve of those bastards.

Draco felt his fingers curl tighter around his wand as he thought of that. He gritted his teeth and hurled another Cruciatus curse at Maximus Langton, a Death-Eater gone rogue to join the rebellion. Only Alecko Carrow had captured him several days ago, before he could even properly defect.

The curse hit Maximus like a ten-ton truck and he writhed on the ground in

agony. Draco knew that it hurt, of course it did, especially when he had unconsciously directed his anger at Hermione's captors to Maximus. He didn't even hate Maximus, just thought he was far too stupid to get caught. Fucking ex-Gryffindors and their tenacity and their bloody hero complexes. It never worked out well in a war.

"Please - please stop," rasped one of the other prisoners. Draco paused, his eyes flickering over to the person who had spoke. A weary old man watched them, his face darkened with bruises and his eyes almost on the brink of insanity. He reminded Draco far too much of Hermione. "I-I'll tell you everything - everything you need to know."

Draco's eyes narrowed, and he flickered a glance over at Theo, who was leaning against the wall and watching them impassively. "Theo?"

Theo's eyes glinted with amusement and something like ferocity. But only Draco caught that. Everyone else saw the look of death on his face as he strode across the room with purpose.

"Always so many interruptions..." Theo muttered, and pointed his wand at the old man. "Incarcerous."

Ropes slid quickly around the man, squeezing the life out of him. With another flick of his wand, Theo dragged the man across the room and towards an inner cell. They disappeared out of sight. And then there was nothing but silence.

Draco let his grey eyes sweep across the room, landing severely on each and every one of the prisoners. "You see what happens when you speak out of turn? Or," he directed his wand at Maximus. Impedimenta. Legilimens. Avada Kedavra. The routine was always the same, and Maximus fell dead at his feet, his lifeless eyes still wide open. "What happens when you don't fucking speak at all."

Hermione was having another horrible day. Wrapped up in one of Draco's jumpers - she didn't think he'd mind at all - with the phial clasped within her

hands, she lay on the bed with tears staining her cheeks.

The sleeping draught he'd given her that morning had finally wore off and when she woke, she had found herself all alone again. Thankfully, the room smelled like him, but she was terrified that she'd forget his voice or his face.

Suddenly, the phial in her hands began to burn and she leapt up. Brushing her tears away with the sleeve of her jumper, she stared at it, watching with a fixed fascination and a growing dread as tiny ember words began to glow on it.

Hermione could barely breathe. On the one hand, this, this was a connection to Draco. The first connection he'd established ever since having been away

from her. She didn't know if he had sent this message, or if someone else had sent it, but if this phial was glowing then the rest were too.

But her thoughts were abruptly cut off at a sudden, unfamiliar sound. She heard scuffles from outside, and then footfalls across the living room. Taking a deep breath, Hermione pushed herself off the bed and forced herself to keep as quiet as she could. She edged slowly towards the door, pressing her ear against it.

"Shit, where the hell is it?"

Pansy.

Hermione felt relief surge through her. Friend or foe, Pansy Parkinson's voice was highly welcome. It drowned out every terrible thought and voice in

Hermione's head, if only for a brief second.

"I can't bloody believe...on the one day I forget to bring it - " There were sounds of her footfalls as she ran into another room. A distant door slammed shut, followed by the same, unfamiliar sound. Then the house was quiet once again. Hermione stared at the phial in her hands. The only connection she had to Draco was already beginning to fade, the glowing embers dimming down to nothing.

Draco apparated back to the apartment at one sharp. To his greatest annoyance,

Theo, Pansy and Blaise persisted in following, the sounds of their apparition sounding just mere seconds after his.

"Draco," Blaise stopped him as he moved towards the room. His eyebrows were furrowed as he watched Draco with a faint glimmer of curiosity. "Don't you need the phials?"

"What - " Draco began, before realising what Blaise was referring to. Clenching his jaw, he swung himself up on the counter, keeping one surreptitious eye on his door. He wanted to cast a muffling spell, but Hermione had told him not to the previous day, and he figured she wouldn't want him to today either.

"Hurry up then."

"Stop rushing me," Pansy hollered from

inside the room. Theo sniggered, only to subside when Blaise shot him an unamused glance. Clearly, he'd overheard the exchange the other day and was not happy with Theo trying to hit on his girlfriend. "Here," Pansy ran out a moment later, tossing a phial to Draco and another to Theo. "We're running out of phials, by the way."

"I'll get more from the black market," Blaise assured her, watching as Draco and Theo extracted memories and stored them in the respective phials. "We're running short of Murtlap tentacles and Star Grass too."

Draco stiffened when Pansy's eyebrows shot up. "Since when?"

Blaise shrugged. "Don't know. Only

noticed when I checked the kitchen yesterday. Who's been using those?"

It was fortunate that Blaise and Pansy had their backs to Draco. Draco caught Theo's eye from across the room and gave a subtle nod. Theo immediately assumed a nonchalant expression and steepled his fingers. "Me."

"Well, then, it's on you," Blaise said calmly. "I'll expect the money on the counter by tomorrow."

Theo groaned and slowly got up from his seat, tossing the phial back to Pansy on the way. "I thought we were a family and family shares everything."

"What family?"

Theo ignored Pansy's deadly voice and smirked. "You know - you're the mum,

Blaise's the dad, Draco's the rebellious kid who locks himself in the room all day to wank - "

"Fuck you, Theo."

" - and I'm the good-looking, intelligent kid that mum and dad are so proud of."

There was a silence. And then -

"Did you actually call me a mum?" Pansy shrieked, looking at Theo with a murderous glare after having internalised his words. "Do I look like a mum to you?"

Her voice hit gravity-defying octaves and Draco had to resist the urge to hit her with a silencing charm. Theo chuckled.

And Blaise simply smirked. "Well, you're grounded, Theo. Go to your

bloody room and don't come out."

"No, that's what Draco does," Theo said, with exaggerated patience. "He's the one who wanks in private, remember?"

Draco growled and pushed himself off the counter. He was going to have a bloody headache if he stayed in the same room as Theo for a moment longer.

"Draco, where're you going?"

"To wank, of course," Theo answered Blaise's question in a heartbeat.

Draco flipped him off over his shoulder. The three of them watched as he disappeared into his room, slamming the door shut behind him. Then Blaise turned to Theo, his eyebrows raised.

"Wank, huh?"

Theo shrugged. "Funnier than the

alternative anyway."

They fell silent, each of them taking the time to let Theo's words sink in. They knew clearly what the alternative was - Draco berating himself for every bad thing he had done and ever would do. And Draco Malfoy did a lot of bad things.

In fact, they all did.

"So," Pansy finally broke the silence, turning to Theo with a challenging glint in her eyes and hands set firmly on her hips. "What was that you said about me being your mum?"

"Draco."

Draco barely had time to register the sight of a flurry of brown hair before he felt Hermione hurl herself into his arms. He caught her easily, gripping her firmly by the waist and hauling her up properly when she almost stumbled. Her knees were still weak sometimes, but she seemed far stronger thanks to the healing potions he'd made her.

She choked back a sob and buried her face against his chest. Her fingers fisted tightly at the lapels of his suit. But she wasn't sobbing outrageously this time and he wondered if she was getting better.

And he wondered why he didn't feel any better just knowing that she was.

"Do you still have it?" Draco kept one

arm around her waist and held out his other hand.

Hermione quickly nodded, tears still brimming in her eyes and smiled. She opened her hand and he saw the phial, the edges having made painful red markings on her palm, clear indications that she had been holding it too tightly. "I would never lose it."

"Good." He slipped his arm under her knees and lifted her quickly. After laying her back down on his bed, Draco sank into the chair and let her take his hand.

"Draco?"

He met her wide brown eyes and upturned lips and, for a moment, saw the old Hermione Granger staring back at him. "Yeah?"

She struggled to sit up and he waved his wand to soothe her ribs when she winced. "Why do the phials glow?"

Draco froze.

"There - there was a message earlier," she scrunched her nose thoughtfully. He could almost picture the gears whirring in her head. Rusty as they were, he was somewhat glad to see them at work again. "Is that a - a secret message? Because Pansy came back awhile ago - " "Granger," he cut her off. He looked anywhere but at her.

Those bloody phials. He should've just cast another object with a Protean charm and linked that to her, instead of these phials with important memories in them. But he didn't want to be the only one

who knew of Granger's existence if she happened to be in danger. If Granger ever found herself in danger, lighting his father's phial would alert not just him, but Pansy, Blaise, Theo and even Andromeda. If he was unable to come to her aid, there was always the other four. Just in case.

"I can't tell you what it means," Draco said quietly and tried to ignore the faint trace of disappointment in her eyes. He felt like a tosser, dismissing what little she had learnt. It was the first time she'd taken an interest in learning something new, and he'd just cast that aside. What the hell was wrong with him?

"Oh."

"It's not that I don't want to," Draco

couldn't stop the words from slipping past his lips. "It's just safer that way - that fewer people know what these words mean."

"So Pansy, Blaise and...and Theo - "

"Yeah, just the four of us. Granger," he gripped her hand tightly when she began to look away. "The more you know, the more danger you're in. Do you know why you were tortured?"

Her breathing immediately sped up and her eyes flew to his in horror. "I-I don't like to think about it."

"I'm vague on the details, Granger, but I suspect it was because you knew too much. About the Order."

And Draco's worst fears were confirmed when Hermione stared up at him in

confusion and spoke the words that were a culmination of every bout of torture and Cruciatus curse she ever had to endure.

"What's the Order?"

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h o m e n u m r e v e l i o

Reveals human presence.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Draco didn't even realised he'd rammed his fist straight into the wall until he felt a sharp sting. When he withdrew, his knuckles were bloody and he didn't even care. "Fuck." He cast a quick glance over his shoulder, feeling relieved when he saw Hermione still fast asleep. The sleeping draught and the muffling charm had worked well on her.

Draco paced the room, his mind racing rapidly as he tried to rationalise the situation. He'd been searching for Hermione for two reasons. The first - and this was the driving factor, the one that had him risking his life to begin with - was that he owed her this much.

He could still remember her screams as his bloody Aunt tortured her at the Malfoy Manor. And he'd been forced to watch it all, all of it, staring at the agony in her eyes and listening to her desperate screams until they became a fixture of the nightmares that haunted him every night.

So when he first heard from his Aunt Andromeda that Hermione Granger, one of the most brilliant witches and one-

third of the Golden Trio, was missing, he immediately took it upon himself to find her.

Because no one else did.

Draco didn't understand why. He didn't understand why it was so damn difficult to send out a search party every night to find the one witch who was the best friend of the Boy Who fucking Lived. Andromeda told him that it was because the Order was in a mess.

His lips curled now but it was a smile of utter bitterness. Of course it was a mess. After Potter had been defeated, he and the Weasel had gone into hiding. Hermione had been snatched away by an unidentified Dementor. Then the rest of the Order scattered to save their lives.

It was only about a year-and-a-half ago that Andromeda told him the Order was beginning to reassemble. Andromeda had firmly believed that the return of Hermione Granger would give them hope.

Draco didn't buy the nonsensical notion of hope, but he'd do anything for his Aunt, who had become his guardian after his parents were killed. Thank Merlin Bellatrix was insane and didn't qualify to be his guardian. Draco didn't know if he could stand living with the woman without killing her himself. The only reason he kept her alive for so long was because the Dark Lord considered her his longest ally, even if she wasn't of much value anymore.

But Hermione and hope somehow no longer fit into the same sentence, considering that a large proportion of her memories seemed completely wiped out. Like a clean slate; she seemed to have no memory of the Order, or of the way he'd treated her in the past, or even of saint Potter and Weasel.

And much as Draco thought that Potter and Weasel were a pair of useless fools, the mere suspicion that Hermione had forgotten them sent his head reeling with something akin to despair and desperation.

The war needed to end.

The four of them in this household (with the exception of Hermione, who clearly only possessed vague memories now)

were adamant on that. It was the only reason why they each continued to live, in their own various self-destructive ways. Blaise with his numbing spells and potions, Pansy with her lethal kinks in the bedroom, Theo with his slags and alcohol, Draco with his guilt. They stayed alive because they had a purpose, and the purpose was to end the war.

The easiest option was to return Hermione to Potter, to help ease saint Potter's fucking guilt and get him past that pit of self-pity he was wallowing in. But Draco didn't want to. Not when Hermione was like this. Not when she was screaming in the silence, conjuring imaginary monsters in the dark and tripping over her sentences. Not when he

hadn't found out the truth behind her abduction or when he hadn't found out the truth about her memories.

And not when he wasn't ready to let her go.

Draco settled down onto his chair with a sigh, resting forward so that his elbows were braced on his knees. He stared at the healing blisters on her skin and the fading bruises and the traitorous scars. He stilled when she murmured his name in her sleep, and instinctively reached forward and laced his fingers between hers. She automatically curled hers tightly around his, and pulled him closer to her.

Not yet.

The nightmares did not come the next night. Because Hermione was awoken in the middle of the night when Draco's phial began to burn against her chest. She sat up with a gasp, shifting the phial in her hands so that her skin was not in contact with the glowing embers.

LUNA

The word triggered something unusual in Hermione's head and she felt her breath hitch in her throat. Luna. Luna. "Luna," she whispered in the dark, testing the syllables out on her tongue. It seemed far too familiar, like from a distant

daydream she once had.

But Hermione quickly forgot about that when she caught sight of the glowing phials on Draco's desk. Draco had took off the chain and given it to her earlier that night, so that she could hang it over her neck instead of grasping it all the time.

Shuffling forward, Hermione reached over to the sleeping form beside her on the leather armchair. She squeezed the hand she was already holding. "Draco?" Immediately, his eyes flew open, and the coldness in his silver eyes made her shiver. Then he focused on her, and they softened marginally. "Granger, what's wrong?"

"Luna," Hermione whispered, showing

him the phial.

Draco's eyes fastened onto the phial for a moment or two, and then he shot up. "Shit," he pushed back the armchair roughly before raising his hand for his wand. His wand flew to him immediately. "Granger, I have to check up on something - just give me an hour, or two."

Hermione's eyes widen. She let him go, but mostly because she was a little frightened by his behaviour, and was mostly dazed by waking up so suddenly. He met her wide-eyed gaze and paused. "I won't be gone for long."

"W-will you - " she felt her breath lodge itself in her throat. Something in his eyes was different tonight, grey eyes alert and

with purpose. "Will you be...safe?"

"Yes, of course," he hastily assured her. After a moment's hesitation, he reached over to his desk to grab the two phials and handed it to her. "They're all with you now. Keep them safe."

"I-I will. Please...please remove the spell," she quickly added, when he turned to leave. She wanted to hear him leave and she wanted to wait for him to return. And she thought it would help if she could hear other voices too. The more she stayed in this apartment, the more fascinated she was by Draco's friends. They seemed a lively bunch and she wondered why he never laughed with them.

Draco faltered, taking two quick steps

back to her bed. He leaned down to speak softly to her. "You're - you're not going to like what you hear, Granger. It will get - ugly, but I can assure you that no one is getting hurt."

Her eyes widened. "What is it?"

He shook his head. "You'll understand when you hear it."

"Oh...alright then," she whispered, with a faint smile curving her lips. "Let me hear it."

Draco almost smirked then. And Hermione felt her breath hitch as she watched his lips curl briefly, fleetingly, warmly. But then it was gone and she wanted nothing more than to make him smile again.

"See you soon, Granger." Draco strode

out of the room, replacing the lock charms once he'd shut the door. And the second he removed the muffling charm, Hermione almost suffocated from the sheer terror of it all.

There was nothing but the sound of tortured screaming.

When Draco rushed out, there was utter chaos in the living room. Blaise noticed him immediately and his eyes shot daggers.

"Where the hell were you, Malfoy?" Blaise bellowed, sounding well and truly pissed. And Draco knew he was. Blaise never called him by his surname

unless properly annoyed.

"Sleeping," Draco snapped, immediately springing into action and helping Blaise, pinning Pansy's legs down with a flick of his wand. "Where's the potion?"

"Theo's getting it ready. THEO! Hurry up!"

"You know it doesn't brew instantly, you tosser!" Theo screamed back, from the kitchen. His screams rivalled that of Pansy's, until all Draco could hear was deafening noises in his head and a splitting headache.

Blaise let out a frustrated noise. "If you had made the potion like I told you to and if Draco had woken up on time and if Pansy had checked the calendar then we wouldn't be in this sodding - "

"Oh, how about if you had actually been there to protect your girlfriend - "

"Fuck you, Theo - "

Draco hit both Blaise and Pansy with a Silencio. "Calm yourself, Zabini," he said mildly. He hated that Hermione could hear every damn thing going on in this household. "We've got it all covered. Portkey," he held it out in his palm, "potion," he flicked his wand in Theo's direction, "her bag," he held out his hand and Pansy's ragged backpack came flying across the room to him. "We've done this before, Zabini. She'll be fine."

Blaise let out a shuddering breath when Draco removed the silencing charm on him. "I know, Draco. Sorry about that. I

just - "

He trailed off but he didn't need to say anymore, because Draco understood and he understood perfectly. He'd felt this helpless every time he thought about Hermione. All the months spent searching for her, every time he thought he had a lead but didn't, every time he thought he heard something but didn't.

And even now, when Hermione was safe with him, he still couldn't quench the helplessness when he looked at her and realised that her memories were all in bits and pieces, tattered fragments that he had no idea how to mend.

"Okay, it's done!" Theo rushed out with a phial; his cheeks flushed and beaded drops of perspiration on his forehead.

Draco lifted the silencing charm on Pansy and once again, the room was filled with her agonised screams. "Make sure she drinks every drop," he directed, pinning her legs down with an immobilus charm. Once she had swallowed, Draco lifted the portkey.

Theo immediately took that as a cue to leave. "Wake me up when it's my turn," he said, ambling back to his room with a loud yawn.

Blaise shot Draco a look both grateful and pleading at the same time, and Draco nodded. "She'll be fine."

"Of course she will be, once she's done with it. I was talking about you, mate. First watch is always the hardest."

Draco flashed one of his rare, brief

smirks just before he placed his and Pansy's hands on the portkey. "That's why I take it."

When Draco returned, he froze when he saw Hermione sitting on the bed and tracing her finger on the covers. He shut the door behind him, casting silent muffling and lock charms. Hermione immediately raised her head, and her brown eyes danced in the moonlight when she saw him.

"Draco," she breathed, shuffling forward as quickly as she could.

Draco covered the distance between them, letting her latch onto his jumper,

fisting the fabric between her hands. After pressing her face against his chest for a moment or two, Hermione drew back and took his hand, before pausing.

"You're freezing," she said, the concern in her voice absolutely crushing. She brought his hand near her lips and puffed on them lightly.

Her warm breaths were welcoming, but then there was the problem of how close her lips were to his skin. And for a wild, irrational moment, Draco thought of how her lips would feel against his skin. Or not just on his skin, but on his lips too.

But just as the thought came, it vanished equally as quickly, and Draco hastily wrenched his hand from her grasp, stumbling back a step as he did. He

ignored the fleeting glimpse of hurt in her eyes and settled down on the edge of the bed, frowning down at the covers. "What were you doing earlier?"

Hermione gazed at his hand like she didn't know whether to take it again. Feeling a surge of guilt in his chest, Draco held out his hand again, making sure to look unaffected when she took it, a contented smile glossing her lips. "I-I was spelling."

His eyebrows shot up. "Spelling?"

"Yes. See," she flipped his hand so that the back of his hand was on her knee, and her finger was hovering unsteadily over his palm. Taking a deep breath, she slowly spelt out the word she had seen earlier. "L-U-N-A. Luna." She lifted her

eyes to his silver ones. "It - it means moon, doesn't it?"

Draco felt his breath catch in his throat. "How did you know that?"

"I - " and Hermione frowned, her gaze seemed distant. " - I don't know. It's a very familiar word, but I just - I can't remember where I - "

"Granger, it's fine," he quickly cut in, when her breathing began to become shallow and sporadic, the fear gripping her eyes once again. "You're right, by the way. Luna means moon in Latin. Luna plena - full moon. There's a full moon out tonight."

"Is there?" Hermione immediately turned around, her gaze fixed on the window behind them.

Draco watched her silently, taking in her long lashes and stubborn nose, the blissful turn of her lips and the wild brown curls that tumbled over her shoulder in disarray. He'd always thought Granger pretty. No point denying that now.

But the moonlight against her face and the shadows that never seemed to eclipse her; the wide-eyes and the smiling mouth and the peaceful expression on her face - it was this version of Hermione that seemed the most beautiful so far. It was a Hermione who was untainted by the ghosts of her past and had no fear of the future, simply because she didn't know it. Draco wondered how long this version of

Hermione could last. He wondered if he could preserve her that way forever.

He wondered if it was the most selfish thing he had ever thought and instantly hated himself for it.

Draco didn't realise that Hermione was speaking to him until her fingers gripped his tightly. Immediately, he focused his attention on her. "Yeah?"

Hermione smiled. "I was asking - what's wrong with Pansy? Is she...is she hurt?"

Her eyes glimmered with unshed tears and Draco hastened to reassure her.

"No, she's fine. She's just - " Draco found the next words so hard to say. Coming to terms with the truth about Pansy had never been easy. Saying out loud was even harder. It was raw and

painful, one of the greyest spots in his life.

To his surprise, Hermione dropped his hand. He watched her with wary eyes as she knelt on the bed, tucking her legs beneath her and reached towards him, sliding a tentative hand up his shoulder. She seemed to be holding her breath just as much as he was. And when she curled her fingers around the nape of his neck, sliding them up into his snow-blond hair, Draco let his eyes fall shut.

He let her sweet scent invade his senses as she reached over with her other hand, drawing it across his other shoulder before curling around his neck. And then she was pulling him gently towards her, and he felt her hot breaths against his

skin, calloused skin against his own. He wanted to flinch away and lean into her all at once. His skin was frosted cold and hers was the warm of lazy summer days. He felt her lips suddenly press against his temple and he stilled, memorising how it felt and wanting nothing more than to feel her lips on his skin again.

"Draco?" Hermione breathed against his skin and he shuddered, fingers digging tightly into his palms as he tried to stop himself from reaching out for her. "Is she safe?"

She was talking about Pansy. Draco opened his eyes and met her hazel gaze. "Yes."

"Then that's all that matters."

And when Hermione smiled against his skin, he felt his heart stutter, and thought to himself that he was well and truly fucked.

Draco did not like the look Pansy gave him the next morning at breakfast. She was watching him from the corner of her eye, smiling innocently when he glared at her and humming annoying little tunes. Blaise and Theo seemed oblivious to all that was going on, but Draco had a feeling that Pansy knew something was amiss. Damn her. Nothing ever escaped her eye.

"You should really eat out here with us -

" she began, when he grabbed the pancakes from her and strode back into his room quickly.

"Not interested."

When Draco came out of his room again, the living room was suspiciously empty, save for Pansy, who was sitting on the sofa, humming a ridiculous tune to herself. Something was definitely amiss. She only looked this happy when she and Blaise had mind-blowing sex. And since she clearly hadn't had any last night, there was no way this thing was about sex.

"Where's Zabini and Nott?" Draco asked calmly, chucking his plate into the sink. Blaise would wash it later. He always did.

"Out," Pansy wandered over to him, her green eyes watching him shrewdly. "I told them I had a bit of a headache and that they could get their arses off to work first. What about you? Why're you still here?"

"Perks of being the favourite Death-Eater, remember? I can go to work whenever I want."

He stiffened when she began to follow him. He wasn't the one with a nose like a bloodhound. She was. He silently undid the locks on his door, knowing that Hermione could hear every damn word said out here.

The moment Draco undid the locks, he pushed open the door. But he wasn't quick enough. And because he wasn't

expecting it at all, he couldn't even deflect the stunning curse that hit him the next second. Before he knew it, he was crashing into his room, head-first. He registered Hermione's startled scream, followed by Pansy's next spell.

"Aresto Momentum."

Instantly, his body slowed towards the ground, and he collapsed on the floor ungainly. He couldn't believe he was actually stunned and tossed around like a ragdoll by Pansy.

"Rennervate."

The moment he got his movement back, he pushed himself up on his feet and whirled round to face her, ready to hex her until she was nothing but a sobbing, quivering mess.

But her eyes were gleaming, and she surveyed first him, followed by Hermione with a smirk on her face. "I knew I smelled a Gryffindor last night."

06 | prior

0 6

p r i o r i n c a n t a t o

Relives previous spells.

Pansy had seen many strange things in her life, most of which had come from Theo. But even Theo's strangest incident, which involved him sticking his head up their Thanksgiving turkey, was nothing compared to what she saw now -

The Slytherin snake and Gryffindor's princess sitting side by side on a bed.

If her fourteen-year old self had seen this, she would've thrown a blue fit. Pansy smirked at the thought of that.

She sat on Draco's desk, legs swinging casually as she continued to watch Draco mumble to Hermione. She couldn't hear them at all, since the only way she'd gotten Draco not to throw her out was to offer to have her ears muffled. He seemed to be calming her down, because she'd gotten quite a fright when Pansy had barged in like that. Hermione flicked a brief gaze over at Pansy, a look of utter apprehension on her face.

Pansy grinned widely.

Hermione's chocolate-brown eyes widened before she glanced away

quickly.

Draco threw Pansy an aggravated look, to which she smiled serenely in return. Inside, though, her mind was in a whirl. Pansy didn't know what the hell was going on, but one thing was for sure - Hermione Granger was not doing well. She quite missed the old Hermione - annoying as that one was, with her know-it-all attitude and her bloody Gryffindor pride. Where had that Hermione gone?

Pansy couldn't even recognise this version of Hermione, who squirmed at the slightest glance and who looked at Draco like...Pansy bit her lip and tried to think of a good way to describe it.

Adoration.

Yes, that was the word for it. Hermione looked up at Draco like he hung the moon. Like he was the only reason the world (or her world, at least) existed. She seemed to cling onto every word he spoke, her eyes fixated on him and no one else, her fingers clutching Draco's like he was her lifeline.

Pansy couldn't remember Hermione ever looking at anyone that way. Not even the Weasel, back at Hogwarts. Pansy wondered if Draco could see what she saw.

Or maybe he couldn't, and the smirk on Pansy's face grew as she turned her attention to Draco now. Draco was unusually relaxed, she noticed. His jaw wasn't clenched, his shoulders weren't

tensed and his wand was -

Pansy glanced round quickly, before her eyes landed on a familiar-looking one on the dresser. Right there on the dresser. She could take it and he wouldn't even know.

Tempting as that thought was, Pansy returned her gaze to Draco and continued to catalogue the minute details. The unusual warmth in his eyes, the way he seemed to lean in towards Hermione as he talked before pulling back every now and then, his fingers interlaced tightly with hers.

Well.

Guess there were still miracles during a war.

After a good three minutes, Draco finally

straightened. He shifted so that his legs were back down on the floor. Hermione inched closer to him, her hand still in his but her eyes slowly, hesitantly slid up to Pansy.

Pansy's ears finally registered their slow breathing and she realised that Draco had removed the muffling charm. Ignoring his pointed, cold gaze, she smirked at the bushy-haired girl a mere distance away from her.

"Hello, Hermione."

Hermione looked startled for a moment and she paused, unsure of what to say, until Draco glanced over at her and nodded. Taking a deep breath, Hermione tried to smile back, but it came out weak. "Hi."

"I'm Pansy Parkinson," without getting off the desk, Pansy leaned forward to reach out a hand to Hermione, who stared like she didn't know what to do. "You shake," prompted Pansy, smirking wider when Draco let out an annoyed growl. She held her hand out until Hermione slowly reached gripped it. Pansy closed her fingers firmly around Hermione's trembling ones and shook, before letting go. "I don't suppose you remember me? Fellow schoolmate, Slytherin and one of your many arch-nemeses?"

Hermione's eyes grew wide, her eyebrows knitting together faintly. Pansy could practically see her trying to recall. It was an alarming sight. Who knew that

the cleverest witch of their year would be reduced to this?

"Draco, a word?" Pansy threw him a meaningful look, jerking her head towards the door, before smiling softly this time at Hermione. "Nothing bad, I promise."

Draco hesitated. And after taking one quick glance at Hermione's fearful eyes, Pansy quickly backtracked. "We can talk in here," she said kindly, directing her words more at Hermione than at him. She almost couldn't believe herself. Pansy. Being kind to Hermione. Would miracles never cease? "You just have to muffle your ears."

But the look on Hermione's face was enough to make Pansy feel like she'd

done the whole bloody world a bloody favour. Hermione smiled and nodded, waiting patiently as Draco muffled her ears wordlessly, and letting him ease her back down onto the bed. She continued to watch Draco, occasionally sliding her eyes over to stare at Pansy as well.

Their hands, Pansy noticed, never separated.

For good measure, Pansy cast a silent muffling spell on entire room, waving her hand to swing the door shut. She didn't have to look to see Draco doing up the magic locks on the door. He was terribly private that way. No wonder none of them knew about Hermione's existence.

Once he was done, she turned to him, a

knowing expression in her eyes and a wicked smile playing on her lips. "I think I owe Millicent two galleons."

"What?"

"Millicent Bulstrode? Fellow Slytherin? She was a romantic nut, kinda thought you might've had a thing for Hermione since you always made fun of her during Hogwarts days. I bet her two galleons it wouldn't happen - but here we are."

"Bulstrode is dead."

"Oh," Pansy found a dull, aching pang in her chest, which she quickly shoved away. "I hadn't known."

Draco scoffed.

"Guess I could put the galleons on her grave." Draco's eyes flew to hers, a shade of sharp silver, and Pansy raised

her hands defensively. "Just picking up on Theo's motto. Better to make a morbid joke out of it than to think about the alternative."

"What do you want, Parkinson?"

Pansy shrugged. "How about you start from the very beginning? Like, how did you even find her in the first place? Were you searching for her?" Pansy knew Draco well enough to know that his silence meant she had hit the nail on the head. "Alright, so you were searching for her. When'd you find her?"

"The patrol I took over from Nott."

"The Quarry? That's about - " Pansy did a quick calculation in her head. " - a week ago, then? We truly are losing our touch if we couldn't tell that you were

hiding a fugitive in your room," she shook her head, smirking when Draco's eyes flashed amusement. "What was she doing there?"

Pansy had never seen Draco Malfoy second-guess himself before. But he did, at that moment, a feeling undetectable emotion glimpsing his features. He glanced briefly at Hermione, who had her eyes closed by then, her chest rising and falling with slow, measured breaths.

"She was captured."

"By who?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't bloody know."

"For how long?" When Draco hesitated, Pansy shrugged. "You can put more locks on my memory later. As many as you

want. You know that you can trust me." After a few seconds of deep contemplation, Draco's jaw clenched and he met her eyes frankly. "Three years."

Pansy forced herself to maintain the impassive expression she had on her face. A lot of things could happen in three years. Painful things. Atrocious things. Horrifying things. Pansy didn't want to think about it. And so she and Draco sat, both trying to look like they weren't affected by the circumstances of the girl lying on the bed.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Pansy asked, at last. Her voice sounded unfamiliar, kinder, and she knew that Draco was surprised.

"Keep her hidden," said Draco calmly. "Talk to her." His gaze eventually drifted over to Hermione again, and Pansy felt something in her chest tighten as she watched him.

Not out of jealousy, no. Pansy loved Blaise dearly. But the way Draco looked at Hermione was an awful lot like the way Blaise looked at Pansy herself. Whether Draco knew it or not, Pansy could tell that his feelings ran deep.

But nothing good ever came out of people who loved during a war. She was already prepared to die; and she woke up everyday thinking it could be her last. The only reason why she held on, and would continue to do so, was for Blaise - whom she loved. For Draco - whom

she would forever be indebted to. And even for Theo - whom she wanted to see happy.

And now, as much as it irked her to admit it, there was one more reason to fight the cause she fought so hard for. If Hermione Granger could be the reason for the war to end, somehow, then Pansy would protect her at all costs.

"Alright," Pansy finally said, smirking when Draco's surprised eyes met hers.

"Surprised? I can be nice, you know."

"Parkinson being nice? Never thought I'd see the day."

"Hello kettle, this is pot."



Hermione was terribly startled to see an unfamiliar figure sitting by her side when she woke up. She froze when she saw glimmering green eyes instead of the warm silver ones she was so accustomed to.

"Hello, Hermione."

The familiar voice registered in her head before the figure did. It was Pansy Parkinson. Draco's friend. The only other girl in the apartment.

Hermione struggled to sit up, coughing briefly when her lungs and ribs began to ache. Pansy immediately leapt down from her post on the desk and strode towards her. With the tip of her wand,

she touched Hermione's chest. A pale blue light streaked out from the wand and Hermione instantly felt soothed.

"Better?"

"Yes...t-thank you." Hermione blushed when Pansy frowned briefly, realising that she was stuttering far more than she usually was. She couldn't help it. Pansy and her confidence made Hermione nervous.

"Now drink this," Pansy placed a bottle in her hands. Hermione drank, making sure to keep her free hand on the phial that Draco had left with her. It dangled at the base of the chain, and Hermione liked the feel of it within her grasp. It comforted her.

She didn't notice Pansy's eyes slide

down towards it, nor did she notice the look of apprehension that slid across Pansy's features.

"Draco had to attend a meeting with the Dark Lord," Pansy continued, starting forward when Hermione choked abruptly. "You alright?"

"Yeah." Pansy pressed her wand briefly against Hermione's chest again. "Thank you. I-I just - Draco..." Hermione forced herself to calm down and rationalise the thoughts in her head before saying them aloud. "Draco has never told me about what - what he did before...not explicitly, anyway."

"Do you know what he does?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I know he's a Death-Eater...and he searches for

people...and he - he said he uses the Unforgivable curses - he says you all do."

"He's right," Pansy smiled tentatively, surprised when she saw no look of judgement in Hermione's eyes. The old Granger would've immediately voiced her opinions, calling them filthy Slytherins or something of that sort. "That's what we do because we're Death-Eaters. But Draco's special. He's better than all of us."

"Really?"

Pansy didn't miss the glimmer of interest in Hermoine's eyes, or the way the girl shifted closer to her. "Well, Draco's sort of the Dark Lord's favourite. He sets the rules for the rest of the Death-Eaters -

and Blaise, that's my boyfriend, reinforces them and makes sure they're kept. Draco, along with Theo - that's the other bloke living here - also interrogates the important prisoners; Draco has a knack of getting really useful information out of them. And, sometimes, he joins me in hunting down people. I'm a Snatcher. In the Dark Lord's inner circle, so I have the dark mark," Pansy paused to drag up the sleeve of her sweater, "but one of the head Snatchers."

Hermione flinched when she laid eyes on Pansy's mark. Pansy watched intently as Hermione's breaths quickened, and tears welled up in her eyes. "I-I don't want to - I remember..."

"You don't have to look at it," Pansy hastily pulled down her sleeve. "There, it's gone, see?" Hermione began to sigh in relief, but Pansy sat down on the bed next to her. She felt a stubborn curiosity surge through her, one that would make Draco throw her out if he knew of this, but Pansy was an avid believer that curiosity never killed the bloody cat.

"Hermione."

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?" Hermione nodded, and Pansy braced herself. "That mark you saw on me - did you see it on the people who captured you?"

"I don't want to - to talk about it."

"Then let me see it."

Hermione's eyes flew to hers. Pansy

smiled and tried to speak as comfortably as she could. Which wasn't very comforting at all. It never was one of her fortes, to be honest.

"I am skilled at Legilimency." Hermione's eyebrows furrowed. Ignoring the odd sinking feeling in her heart, Pansy pushed on, speaking clearly and slowly. "Theo, Blaise and me - we all are. Draco taught us. We can use magic to gather memories, as much memories as we want. We can navigate through your labyrinth of thoughts; dig up past events you believe you've forgotten."

Pansy tried to ignore the way Hermione was gazing at her with rapt attention, like she'd never heard of Legilimency

before. It was painful to see Hermione like this, even though Pansy had never been on very good terms with her before.

"Now, I'm not trying to brag - okay, I kind of am - but apart from Draco, I think I'm the next best at Legilimency. If you allow me to, I would like to view your memories. It wouldn't last for more than five minutes; I'll just be grabbing what I can and viewing them at my own pace later. And it wouldn't hurt - "

Hermione began to nod.

" - but, you will revisit everything," Pansy told her firmly. "In those few moments, your mind will be filled with memories of the past, as many as you have to offer. But it will be over before

you know it, and you will never have to tell me what happened, because I'll already know it."

There was a pause. Pansy studied Hermione, holding her breath as she crossed her fingers for Hermione to agree. After what seemed like forever, Hermione barely managed a nod. Pansy smiled triumphantly.

"Okay, let's begin. You can think of Draco if you want." Hermione's hand immediately went to the phial hanging on the chain. When Pansy noticed the fingers on her other hand still twitching, she felt a pang of sympathy for the girl. "Do you want to hold my hand?"

"Yes, please." Hermione slipped her hand into Pansy's without further

confirmation.

"Close your eyes."

Hermione shut her eyes, breath quickening as she felt the wand tip brushing against her temple.

"Legilimens."



Draco immediately detected something different in Hermione the moment he returned that day. She wasn't crying. She was deathly silent; and somehow, that seemed far more unnerving to him than anything else.

He paused a good distance away from the bed, unsure of what to say or do as he watched her stare blankly at the wall. She hadn't even realised he had there. Her fingers still grasped the phial tightly, and that was strangely comforting to him. "Granger."

Her gaze immediately flew to his. He watched, warily, as the calm expression on her face crumpled. And then the tears were streaking down her face once more, and she was reaching out for him. "Draco."

He quickly went over, settling down on the bed and letting her grasp firmly onto his shirt. She pulled herself into a sitting position. He exhaled heavily as she pressed her face against his chest, and

then he could feel her tears soaking into the fabric of his shirt.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Draco slowly drew his hand up, resting it lightly on her head. This was the first time he'd made contact with her voluntarily. Her brown curls were soft beneath his touch. He could barely breathe.

"Draco?" Her voice was barely audible.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for finding me...I knew you would, eventually."

His hand stilled on her head. "What?"

"I h-heard you so many times. Leading the Death-Eaters and, finding other...I heard that all, Draco. And - and I could hear you lingering back every

time...asking if anyone was there."

"Where were you?"

"Everywhere. They never kept me in a place for a long time. I-I think they put silencing charms, so...no one ever heard me." Hermione sighed.

But her grip tightened on Draco's when he leaned away. Before she could overthink anything, she stumbled forward to pull him back. Draco instinctively reached forward to steady her, but he froze when she, with an unexpected boldness he didn't know she possessed, braced her fingers on his arms and held them still around her. His muscles clenched beneath her touch, his fingers went rigid on her waist.

"Please don't blame yourself, Draco,"

she seemed to make an effort to not stumble over her words this time. "Hearing your voice every once in awhile - that was enough."

He closed his eyes and couldn't quite keep the brokenness from his voice when he spoke this time round. "I am sorry, Granger, I - "

I tried. So hard. But it just wasn't enough. It was never enough.

"You found me," she whispered, softly in the silence. He felt her lips press briefly against his chest and he let out a shuddering breath, his chest tightening painfully and deliciously, he couldn't decide which. "And - and that is enough."

But it wasn't enough. Draco was furious,

because as Hermione continued to stay calmer than usual, he began to realise that something had shifted. Between the time he'd left her and Pansy alone. He'd actually naively believed that Pansy could take care of Hermione.

So when Hermione was out cold after taking the sleeping draught at one in the morning, Draco stormed out of the room, muffling and locking the door behind him. He found Blaise, Pansy and Theo all in the living room. The two blokes were playing Wizard's Chess, but Pansy was sitting there with a vacant expression in her eyes.

Draco's eyes immediately narrowed as he watched the raven-haired girl. "Parkinson." Her eyes flew to his. "I

need a word with you."

He noticed the tremor in her fingers when she got up. She was out of sorts and he knew she had done something. He didn't even have to use Legilimens to find out. Ignoring Blaise and Theo's curious stares, he led Pansy to their inventory room, muffling and locking the door behind them.

Theo couldn't resist. "You think they're doing it?"

Blaise didn't deign to reply. If Theo thought he'd get worked up by that comment alone, he'd better think again. Draco was his best mate, and he trusted Pansy with every fibre of his being.

So he simply waved his chess piece across the last few squares and smirked

when Theo groaned in defeat.
"Checkmate."

The moment the charms were set, Draco whirled round to face Pansy, a furious expression on his face. Pansy thought it was the most amount of emotion she'd ever gotten out of him; apart from the two other times she recalled clearly.

"What did you do, Parkinson?"

Pansy folded her arms stubbornly across her chest. "I tried to help," she said simply. Most people were afraid of Draco, but she definitely wasn't one of

them.

"You broke her."

"I didn't- "

"Yes, you did. I told you to be careful around her, I told you not to push her until she was better - "

"She's not a fragile doll, Malfoy!" Pansy exclaimed at last, the venom in her voice stopping Draco mid-rant. "She's a person, not an object! She can't be broken! She is far stronger than you give her credit for. If any one of us had gone through even a third of what she's gone through, we would've lost our minds by - " Pansy trailed off as Draco's expression grew murderous.

And then, she was rather afraid of Draco Malfoy.

"You used Legilimency on her?"

"I - "

"You don't fucking use Legilimency on Hermione Granger!"

Pansy stared calmly at him, wondering what it was about Hermione Granger that drew out so much emotion from the emotionless, unfeeling Death-Eater.

"Yes, you do, if Hermione needs help. And she needs help, Malfoy, or are you too thick to see that?"

"Don't you think that if I wanted to use Legilimency on Granger, I would've used it by now?" Draco spat, his lips twisting into a menacing sneer. "But using that spell forces her to remember every single thing she had to go through. Revisit every single bloody minute of

torture."

"And you think I don't know that?" Pansy asked in disbelief, her patience finally wearing thin. Draco paused, his angry grey eyes landing on hers briefly, and Pansy sighed. "Draco, I know that. I told Hermione that too. But she let me view her memories because there was no possible way for her to say them out loud."

Draco didn't say anything, so Pansy took it as a good sign to continue. She transfigured two of the boxes into chairs, and sank down on one of them, motioning Draco towards the other. But he stood, his posture still rigid.

"We've all been using Legilimency as a weapon for so long that we forget what

it's really for - to piece bits of a story that we've long forgotten back together. Think of it as a form of treatment. Granted, it's a little unorthodox; but this is a war. You don't wait for things to get better. You fight to make things better. And the sooner Hermione learns to face her monsters, the better - "

"What are you saying, Parkinson?"

Pansy paused, feeling rather thrown off. Her eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. "Don't you want her to go back to saint Potter and the Order?"

"No." Draco didn't miss a beat.

"Oh."

And Pansy finally realised what she'd glossed over all this while. The bigger picture she hadn't bothered to see

because she was so adamant that it was a ludicrous thought to even entertain. She'd seen from Hermione's memories that the girl was terrified of losing Draco. She just didn't realise that Draco was equally as terrified of losing Hermione. It was a thought that intrigued her but unsettled her all the same.

"Draco," she sighed, shifting closer to him. "You can't keep Hermione here forever."

He was silent.

"She's not broken, you know? They tried to break her," Pansy didn't miss the way Draco visibly flinched. "She just kept bouncing back. That's why they kept her alive. Do you want to see - "

"No."

Pansy's eyes narrowed. "You had better not be acting like nothing happen, like she didn't get tortured because that's absolutely delusional - "

"It's not that, Parkinson. I'd just rather she tell me at her own pace, whenever she's ready."

"Okay." Pansy could live with that. She hadn't meant to rush Hermione either, but she'd known something was wrong with Hermione the moment she laid eyes on the scared girl. And she didn't regret using Legilimency at all, because now she'd found some terribly important information.

She inhaled, wondering how Draco would take this new turn of events once he knew about it. "Do you want to know

who captured Hermione?"

Draco's head shot up immediately. Pansy smiled soberly, bracing herself for his reaction. And she had never hated the mark on her arm more than at that moment.

"Death-Eaters from the inner circle."

07 | wingardium

0 7

w i n g a r d i u m l e v i o s a

Makes objects fly.

The moon bathed the room in a soft warm glow when Draco went back in later that night. Hermione was still fast asleep, curled up in a foetal position on her side, her hands clasping the phial he'd given her.

He stared down at her, watched the slow rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathed deeply. Her face was still scarred at certain places; some bruises

and scars still hadn't faded. Her frizzy mane of hair fanned around her in haphazard directions, a reminder of the wild, feisty girl she had once been.

Draco realised that he had never been filled with more self-loathing than he had ever felt at that moment.

Hermione suddenly shifted, her breathing becoming rapid and shallow. Quickly seeing that she was about to have another nightmare, Draco sat down on the bed and grasped her arms when she began to push herself up. He cast another muffling charm on the room when she started sobbing uncontrollably. She was far less violent this time round, and she eventually awoke, her eyes bloodshot and wide as she stared

up at him.

"Draco?"

"It was just a dream, Hermione," he murmured, instinctively leaning into her touch when she brought her hand up to his cheek. "Go back to sleep."

He quickly realised his slip when her eyes widened in something like wonder.

"You - you called me 'Hermione'."

"You call me 'Draco' all the time."

Her lips curved into a gentle smile.

"Touché."

He made to move away, but she kept her grip firm on his hand. And for some unfathomable reason, he made a snap decision to not pull away this time. Transfiguring his leather chair quickly into a spare pillow, he laid it against the

base of the headboard and leaned against it. With his other hand, he reached down and ran his fingers soothingly through her hair, marvelling in the way the frizzy ends curled instinctively around his fingertips.

Hermione stared up at him, a contented smile playing on her lips and he frowned down at her. "Go to sleep, Hermione." She nodded and shifted, pressing her lips briefly against his wrist before letting her eyes fall shut.

Draco awoke the next morning when he felt someone attempting to shift him. His eyes flew open, only to see Hermione's

face inches away from his. She was leaning over him on her knees, one of her arms was wrapped tight around his shoulder, her other hand on his head, as she awkwardly tried to manoeuvre him down. Her lips were pursed with the effort and she didn't even notice that he was awake.

"Hermione." He stifled a smirk when she shrieked and loosened her grip. He managed to prop himself up on his elbow just in time, grasping her arms firmly so she wouldn't fall on top of him. "What're you doing?"

She blushed and sat back down on the bed. But she hardly noticed that her fingers were still grasping him firmly, or the way his eyes drifted down to where

their skin lay in firm contact with each other. "You looked uncomfortable just - sitting there. I wanted to help you lie down...it's your bed, after all."

"You could've used a wand."

The instant the words were out of his mouth, Draco wanted to slap himself. No, Hermione couldn't use a wand. He'd spent a lot of time observing her the past few days, and one of the things he noticed was that she no longer used magic. He mentally kicked himself when he saw the sadness in her irises.

"I-I wish I could," she whispered, her eyes straying to the wand he'd gave her. She had left it on the dresser just in case, but had never bothered to touch it. Her fingers twitched. "I just don't know

how to - anymore."

Draco's jaw clenched. One more reason why he couldn't send her back to the fucking Order. They were going to make her fight for them, and he'd be damned if he let her go into a war without any fucking preparation whatsoever.

"I'll teach you," the words left his lips before he could even have a chance to think them through.

But the brilliant smile that spread across her face was so fucking worth it. "Really?"

"Yes - "

He didn't even get the chance to finish the sentence before she was barrelling right into him. Caught off guard, Draco's elbow gave and he felt his back hit the

wall. The next thing he knew, Hermione was wrapping her arms tightly around him, her fingers grasping tightly onto his shirt.

"Thank you," she choked, stifling a happy sob, "thank you, Draco."

Draco didn't reply. He simply reached up and threaded his fingers through her hair, resting his hand lightly on her head. He tried to pretend like his heart wasn't racing.

Draco was distracted that afternoon. He'd tried to keep his head in the game, but he couldn't help staring at the Death-Eaters around him. It was all he could

do to keep the murder out of his eyes, especially after he'd caught Pansy's warning glare at him across the room. But he needed to know. He needed to know who the bastards who had captured Hermione were.

But perhaps he'd gotten a little too distracted. And so he wasn't surprised when the Dark Lord told him to stay back after the meeting was over, and everyone else had dispersed to their individual jobs.

"You seem a little - on edge today, Draco," the Dark Lord said, once they were in the hall alone.

Draco's eyes landed briefly on the Dark Lord's wand - the Elder Wand - clasped between his pale, bony fingers. Draco

met the Dark Lord's gaze evenly. "My apologies, my lord," he said. "I was thinking of potential Death-Eaters to accompany me on the next mission to Azkaban."

"Don't we have our usual schedule?"

"Forgive me if I sound impertinent, my lord, but with the inner circle expanding and more Death-Eaters joining our cause, there's bound to be traitors. It's the reason why we have so many prisoners in our cells. A fifth of those are defected Death-Eaters."

"What would you suggest, then, Draco?"

Draco's eyes gleamed. This was going just the way he wanted. "I require a team that I can trust. You know I succeed in every mission you send me on, my lord -

"

"Indeed you do," and the Dark Lord looked quite pleased.

" - and if you allow it, this team I lead will see nothing but success. We have patrol groups and bounty hunters, but the success of their missions are always dependent on the quantity of Death-Eaters. I want nothing but quality, my lord. I'm certain that you do too."

"Of course. Quality always supersedes quantity. I never wanted to expand my inner circle to the size it is now, but MacNair convinced me otherwise."

"It would be plausible if MacNair's intention was to strengthen your forces, my lord. But judging by the recent amount of defected Death-Eaters we've

captured, it's clear to see that he's not picking the right people. I would rather not work with people who could shoot a killing curse at me when my back is turned - not that I'll actually allow it," Draco added, in amusement.

"Nor will I," the Dark Lord said, before nodding in satisfaction. "You can pick your team at the next meeting, Draco. And I expect nothing but the best results you have to offer."

Draco leaned back in his seat and smirked. "You have my word."

"Pansy?"

Pansy looked up from the book she was

reading and glanced over at Hermione. The bushy-haired girl had a book propped open in front of her as well, and Pansy thought she painted a very nostalgic picture. Hermione suddenly seemed a lot like the old one she was so used to.

Even though she was studying a book that was meant for a first year student at Hogwarts.

It was afternoon, and Pansy had taken it upon herself to spend the rest of the day with Hermione, since Draco was clearly still busy with work. The rest of the house was empty, since Theo was on one of his patrols and Blaise had gone to the black market. So, upon arriving home, Pansy had undone the locks on Draco's

door (all of them figured out Draco's locks a long time ago, they just had the courtesy to never barge in on him), and found Hermione.

Hermione had been quite a wreck when Pansy first found her. She was crying silently, but tracing words on the bedsheet to distract herself. Pansy figured she could do with some reading. After all, Hermione Granger loved to read.

"Yes?"

"W-which house was I in? Back in Hogwarts?"

Pansy tried hard not to sigh. Closing her book, she chucked it onto Draco's bed and went over to Hermione, who was sitting by the window. Opening the glass

doors of Draco's library with a flick of her wrist, she held out her hand. "Accio Hogwarts 1991 yearbook."

A dusty old book came flying to her. Pansy grabbed it and smirked at the pure look of wonderment on Hermione's face. "You were in Gryffindor," Pansy said, sitting down next to Hermione and opening the book. She quickly flipped through the pages, pausing when she finally turned to the Gryffindor house page. She automatically grimaced.

Hermione, on the other hand, stared at the page intently. "I-is that me?" Her finger hovered uncertainly to the picture of a beaming girl with frizzy, untameable hair.

"Yes," Pansy replied. "Always quite the

sunshine back then, no matter the weather." She pointed at another picture that made her grimace again. Saint fucking Potter with his cheesy scar and faux-innocent eyes. "Remember him?"

Hermione shook her head.

And Pansy felt her heart sink. "Harry Potter," she told Hermione, pointing again to the picture, before pointing to several others. "The wea - I mean, Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Seamus Finnegan, Lave - " Pansy stopped herself. Lavender Brown was dead. No use mentioning her then. "Parvati Patil and Dean Thomas. Remember them? They were all from Gryffindor too."

Hermione bit her lip, before pointing to the Neville's picture hesitantly. "This -

this one...a little," but her attention was soon on the other pictures. Pansy blew out a breath through her teeth. Oh, boy. The Weasel was not going to be happy. But her thoughts were quickly interrupted when Hermione frowned. "Where's Draco?"

"Oh, Draco's not from Gryffindor," Pansy told her, with a smirk. Merlin, she'd give anything to see Draco's face if he were here right now. "Nor are any of us, for that matter." She quickly flipped several pages, skipping past the irrelevant Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. "Here we are. That's me," her eyes misted as she saw her young self, and she hastily moved on. "That's Theodore Nott. Blaise Zabini. And - " she finally

landed her finger on picture with the boy who had the best scowl. " - Draco Malfoy."

Pansy didn't miss the way Hermione's eyes brightened or the way her lips curved in a fond smile. "Hermione?"

The other girl glanced up.

"About your memories - " Hermione's eyes widened. " - I meant about Draco," Pansy hastily said, feeling a rush of relief when Hermione began to calm down. "I saw that you remembered Draco even during Hogwarts days. I specifically recall one very lucid memory of you clipping him right in the nose."

Hermione smiled and looked far more relaxed than Pansy had ever seen her.

Her brown eyes were twinkling. "Yes. I don't quite recall why I did that...but I think - I think he deserved it."

Pansy smirked. Draco probably did. But then her smile faded as she thought of the repercussions of Hermione's mismatched memory. "You do remember that you hated him in the past, don't you?" She said, opting for the blunt option instead of beating round the bush. She was almost certain Draco had never addressed this matter before; choosing instead to cherish the moments where Hermione thought the world of him. "You two got on each others' nerves constantly."

"Oh, yes, I-I remember. Draco was rather difficult then," Hermione's smile

grew. "He's good now."

And Pansy had to return Hermione's smile because, no matter how many bad things Draco Malfoy did now, she too saw him as a good person. "Yes, he is."

Draco spent the next few nights teaching Hermione magic all over again. It seemed almost painful to watch, like a handicapped person trying to learn how to stand on their own two feet again.

On one of the nights, Hermione watched with rapt admiration as he levitated a book without a wand. She asked him to do it three more times, eyes wide and smiling when he levitated several books

simultaneously, just for her benefit. But when he waited for her to do it, she hesitated, fingers clutching the spare wand he'd given her anxiously.

"Hermoine?"

"Yeah, I just - " she exhaled visibly, biting her lower lip. Draco sat down next to her on the bed, reaching down to take her hand. He didn't notice the flush on her cheeks or the quickening of her breath.

He held her hand with the wand as he slowly showed her the precise movements. "Wingardium Leviosa," he said, and she could feel his hot breath on her skin. Then he dropped her hand and she suddenly felt cold.

Hermione inhaled. Gripping her wand,

she pointed it at the book. "W-wingardium...leviosa."

The book didn't budge an inch.

Draco held her hand up when she automatically lowered it. "Again. Firmer and louder this time."

"Wingardium...leviosa..."

The book still lay motionless and Hermione fought the tears that threatened to spill past her eyelids. She had hoped. But clearly it wasn't enough. She cast a discreet glance over at Draco, but his expression was shuttered, his lips pressed into a grim line.

"Again. More distinct movements," he traced his finger in the air to show her. "Don't hesitate," he added, when she tried again and failed. After her twenty-

third try, Hermione was biting her lip to keep from sobbing out loud.

Draco glanced over at her, finally pulling himself out from his usual, detached professionalism he adopted when teaching someone and shifted closer to her. Without dwelling too much on it, he slid his arm around her and pulled her into his chest, feeling like a complete bastard for pushing her to try so many times. He didn't know why he did. Perhaps a part of him desperately wished that one of the best witches he'd ever seen in his life hadn't lost all of her magic.

But this new Hermione Granger was no longer the tenacious, stubborn witch he knew (and hated, sort of) back in

Hogwarts. She no longer pinned high hopes on herself and didn't force herself to be better than everyone else. But she had also mellowed down and was far less judgemental and far kinder. He couldn't decide which version of her he liked better; or perhaps the many sides she had always fascinated him.

"It's fine, Hermione," he murmured, pressing his lips briefly against her hair when she let out a stifled sob, clinging to him desperately. "We can try again tomorrow."

Hermione stayed awake that night, watching as Draco himself fell asleep on

his usual leather armchair. When she thought that he was well and truly asleep, she sat up in bed carefully and reached for her wand on the dresser. She tugged the chain attached to Draco's phial over her neck and set it down on the bedspread. Then she pointed the wand at it and took a deep breath.

"Wingardium Leviosa," she whispered, making sure to keep her voice low so that Draco would not be disturbed.

Nothing.

"Wingardium Leviosa."

Still nothing.

Third time's a charm, she reminded herself optimistically, and pointed the wand firmly at the chain.

"Wingardium Leviosa."

This time, the chain lifted. Just the slightest bit, before dropping back down on the bed again. But that was enough for her. Hermione felt a surge of joy spread through her and she smiled to herself in the darkness, only to drop her wand in surprise when a familiar, silky voice sounded beside her.

"Welcome back, Granger."

Hermione spun round, only to realise that Draco had been watching her all this while, his silver eyes like a cat's in the dark. He had the faintest trace of a smirk on his lips, and his tone was almost teasing.

She smiled brightly at him, reaching over to wrap her arms around his waist. Her action itself forced her halfway into

his lap, and she suppressed a shiver when he looped his arms loosely around her, his palms sliding firmly against the small of her back.

Lifting herself up slightly, she pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. "Hermione," she reminded him.

His lips quirked in a brief, wry smirk; but she could've sworn he looked almost nervous about the tiny distance separating them. "Right," she felt the low rumble of his chest when he spoke. "Hermione."

Reluctantly, she detached herself from him and crawled back to the bed, making sure to take his hand tightly between hers. She couldn't quite rationalise her earlier actions or fathom what she was

doing. Testing boundaries, she supposed. Seemed the boundaries weren't quite clear cut that night.

Then again, they hadn't been clearly set for a long while now.

08 | finite

08

finite incantatum

Terminates all spell effects.

Draco relished the looks of surprise on the Death-Eaters' faces when the Dark Lord brought up the matter of a new, elite group at the next meeting. Even Theo looked surprised, and that was saying something, because Theodore Nott was hardly ever taken by surprise. When the Dark Lord gave him permission to pick his team, Draco

pushed back his chair slowly, letting the legs grate loudly against the linoleum floor tiles. He waved the other seated Death-Eaters up and gestured them to stand with the rest.

"My lord," this came from Yaxley, who all but sneered when Draco gestured for him to get the fuck up. He'd always been unhappy ever since Draco was picked as the Dark Lord right-hand man.

The Dark Lord didn't react.

"Don't piss on my fucking parade, Yaxley, move," Draco whisked his wand in Yaxley's direction and the man slid across the floor, coming to a sudden stop and tumbling down because of the abrupt momentum. Some of the Death-Eaters laughed.

"Right," Draco sat at the edge of the table, surveying the Death-Eaters in front of him with a measured, heavy gaze. He threw a brief glance over at the Dark Lord, who was watching with a calculative gleam in his serpentine eyes.

"Any suggestions, my lord?"

"I quite trust your judgement, Draco."

"Thank you, my lord," Draco dipped his head briefly in faux gratitude, before turning back to the Death-Eaters. With his wand, he pointed straight at Bellatrix. "Auntie dearest," he said, quite mockingly, but she didn't catch it. Her smile was pure pride directed at Draco as she leapt forward joyously and came up to him.

Draco tried not to think about hitting her

with a killing curse there and then, although he was highly tempted to do so every time he laid eyes on Bellatrix fucking Lestrange. He loathed her, especially after seeing her torture Hermione in front of his very eyes.

But being a skilled Occlumens, Draco had kept his hatred for her well-hidden. And Bellatrix had been immensely proud of his accomplishments as he rose higher up the ranks of the Death-Eaters. She was evidently ecstatic that someone in her family shared her ardent (albeit twisted) love and fervour for the Dark Lord.

"It would be an honour, Draco," Bellatrix grinned widely, flashing her yellow and decaying teeth. She stood

beside him, staring down contemptuously at the other Death-Eaters.

Draco ignored her and pointed his wand in the direction of his friend. "Pansy Parkinson." He didn't miss the twinkle in his friend's eyes as she stepped forward. "Maisie Donalds. Graham Pritchard. Malcolm Braddock. Alecto Carrow. Guthrie Rhodes," he smirked when Theo shot daggers at him from across the room. "And Theodore Nott."

"Just nine?" This came from MacNair, who seemed rather affronted that he wasn't picked. "To break into Azkaban? My lord - "

But before either the Dark Lord or Draco could intervene, Bellatrix stood

in front of the group, brandishing her wand at MacNair with an unhinged glint in her eye. "You dare doubt our capabilities?" She hissed, sounding absolutely furious. "We would never be picked if my nephew didn't think us capable of breaking into Azkaban!" Draco simply smirked. It seemed Bellatrix was useful after all.

"What the hell was that?"

Draco ignored Pansy, who had immediately begun yelling the moment they were back in the apartment. He eased up on the muffling charms in his own room - so that Hermione could hear

their voices but not specific parts of their conversation - and went into the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of Firewhisky from the fridge, popped the cap open with his wand and chugged.

"Draco!"

"Keep your knickers on, woman, and let the man drink," Theo smirked and leaned against the counter. "Oi, Draco, throw me a bottle, will you?"

Draco tossed him a bottle, and two to Blaise, who handed one to Pansy. As exasperated as the witch was, she couldn't resist chugging as well, enjoying the way the liquid burned down her throat.

"You know, I really thought you had forgotten me, mate," Theo told Draco,

with a rich chuckle. "You can't have fun in a fight without me."

"Yes, speaking of having fun in fights, why wasn't I picked?" Blaise seemed hardly offended, gazing at Draco curiously instead. He knew Draco had his reasons; he never went on missions without having a foolproof plan.

Draco cast another surreptitious glance at his bedroom door again - a look that didn't go unnoticed by Pansy, who narrowed her eyes. She knew that Draco was just dying to go back to Hermione, but she needed to hear what Draco had to say. Missions were difficult, breaking into Azkaban was way tougher, and doing it with only nine members seemed impossible.

Draco smirked briefly at Blaise. "You're the tenth member."

Blaise blinked. "What?"

Setting his bottle down, Draco braced his arms on the counter and waited for the other three to give him their full attention before he began. "There are two parts to this mission. The first - as everyone knows - is to break into Azkaban and free the Death-Eaters. It's simple; Bellatrix has been in Azkaban - which was why I picked her - and she'll let us view her memories of the place, which will help when we navigate our way through the prison. I'll be splitting the group into two. Nott, you and Parkinson will be in the other group with Bellatrix and two others. Keep an eye on

them, make sure you deal with any trouble that gets in the way."

Theo grinned. "Looking forward to it."

"Stay clear of the Dementors. They should be on our side, but even if they can't recognise us, they will never know that the three of us are there," he gestured to himself, Pansy and Theo, before turning to Blaise. "I need the numbing potion in concentrated doses for that day. Three times the usual amount. Dementors pick their victims based on emotions. They wouldn't sense a fucking emotion out of any one of us when we go to Azkaban."

Blaise grinned and nodded, grabbing his wand to make a note on his palm. "Dolohov thought it was going to be

difficult with nine members but it's a piece of cake with the numbing spell."

Draco shrugged. "It's going to be difficult for the other members but certainly not for us. Zabini, you're the backup. Use a Disillusionment charm to keep yourself hidden, don't forget to numb yourself and watch our backs. You're the only one able to cast a fully corporeal Patronus - Parkinson's Patronus is still weak - so if all else fails and we're surrounded by Dementors, you'll take care of it."

Blaise shot him a suspicious look. "That's it?"

"Of course not," Draco scoffed and Blaise smiled in satisfaction. He knew Draco far too well to know that

something was up his sleeve. "Now on to part two of the mission - which is kept between the four of us. We all know that there are traitors among the Death-Eaters and I formed this group specifically to sift them out. Parkinson," Draco turned to Pansy, who immediately looked at him expectantly. "You're the best at Legilimency. You know what you have to do. Zabini will be there to collect their memories and insert artificial ones if necessary. Each traitor we find will be handed over to the Dark Lord himself." Theo chuckled, a knowing glint in his eye. "I see what you're doing. Thinning out the Dark Lord's army on the pretext of wanting nothing but loyalty among the Death-Eaters. Pretty sly move you've got

there."

Draco winked and lifted the bottle back to his lips. "What else did you expect from a Slytherin?"

Draco found Hermione curled up on the bed again crying silent tears. His shrewd silver eyes took in the scene before him quickly; noticing that the spare wand he'd given her was carelessly tossed aside on the desk.

Ignoring the tightening feeling in his chest, he picked up the familiar-looking book by the door, recalling that it was the one she'd tried to levitate the night before, and set it on the desk.

"Hermione."

She immediately shot up at the sound of his voice. He was surprised to see her wearing one of his jumpers, and while it fit him just fine, it was huge on her but he somehow thought it looked better on her than it did on him. Her eyes were bloodshot and nose runny, but she smiled all the same and scrambled across the bed towards him. "Draco," she breathed in relief.

He let her wind her arms around his waist and, after a moment's hesitation, wrapped one of his arms around her small frame, and felt her bury her face against his chest. "Levitation didn't work today?"

She let out a choked sob. "No, I-I don't

know why I just - can't. I tried, I really did..."

"It's not an overnight thing, you don't become the most brilliant witch at Hogwarts in a single bloody day."

"Pansy said - " and she sounded so damned forlorn when she spoke that Draco had to brace himself. " - Pansy said that I-I was. You know - a long time ago."

Pansy. Draco made a mental note to give his friend a sharp talking to soon. He understood her good intentions and knew that she wanted Hermione to get better. But he knew better than everyone that some things just didn't go away and people didn't just get better that quickly. Some people never got better at all.

Pansy and her impatience grated on his bloody nerves sometimes.

"Are," Draco corrected, absentmindedly reaching down to tangle a finger in a lock of Hermione's hair. "You still are the most brilliant witch I know."

"I-I don't think so. It might not ever come back," her eyes trailed wistfully to the wand on the desk. He felt her fingers twitch against his back.

"Doesn't fucking matter," he tossed back nonchalantly. "You're still brilliant."

He stiffened when she pulled back. But then she gazed up at him with bright, smiling eyes and Draco couldn't remember if anyone, anyone, had ever looked at him like that before.

Hermione stopped doing magic after that. But she didn't stop learning new things, or browsing through books, even if she didn't understand them. There was something fascinating about trying to make sense of the words in her head, although she tired of it a lot sometimes. One of her favourite things to do was to look at the old yearbooks. Draco had gotten them all out for her, and she'd spend hours just staring at the photographs. Some faces were beginning to become clearer, like a camera gradually zooming into focus. Luna Lovegood. That was one of the

pictures that caught her eye and she spent ages staring at the girl in the yearbook. When she asked Pansy about Luna, Pansy simply smirked and shook her head.

"Batshit crazy," Hermione's eyes had widened but Pansy quickly sent her a reassuring smile, "but completely harmless."

So Hermione thought a lot about Luna and, remembering what Draco had said about Luna Plena, Hermione thought about Luna more when the moonlight was streaming in through the windows at night. She also thought a lot about Neville Longbottom - a funny name, and she remembered it because the name made her laugh at first. But the more she

stared at the boy with the chubby cheeks, the more familiar he felt.

"Fucking git," was Draco's more than generous analysis of Neville Longbottom, when Hermione had asked. "But brave - I'll give you that. He destroyed a bloody Horcrux."

"What's a Horcrux?"

Draco's silver eyes darkened to stormy shades of grey and he shook his head. Hermione was pleasantly surprised when he got off his armchair to sit next to her on the bed, and she immediately scooted closer, leaning her head gently against his arm. He didn't seem to mind at all.

She watched silently as Draco summoned the Encyclopaedia of

Magical Creatures from his bookshelf and flipped through it. Finally, he pointed to a picture of a large green snake. Hermione felt a strange shiver gloss down her spine as she looked at it. "A snake. He killed a snake," said Draco simply.

But when she slipped her hand through his, he seemed to hold on tighter than usual. Not that she was complaining. Hermione was sometimes very, very afraid to lose Draco, even if he wasn't going anywhere.

She quietly returned back to the 1997 Yearbook, her eyes riveting on two particular photographs she'd always stared long at. One was Ronald Weasley, and the other was Harry Potter.

"You didn't really like him much...did you?" She ventured at last, showing Draco the picture of Harry Potter and smiling in amusement when his eyes immediately narrowed.

"No, he's my absolute favourite, I really enjoyed the way he shot a curse at me that sliced open my fucking chest," Draco deadpanned, lips twitching in amusement when Hermione let out a horrified gasp. "Although, you can't judge since you punched me in the face..."

"Only because you deserved it," shot back Hermione, and then her eyes widened. She paused. What she'd said and the way she had said it sounded awfully familiar but distant all the same.

She looked at Draco and noticed that the expression on his face seemed torn between amusement, nostalgia and faint frustration.

But then the look faded and he shook his head, silver eyes twinkling in the dim lighting of their room. "Always so bloody stubborn, Granger."

She smiled up at him and laced their fingers together. "Hermione," she reminded him affectionately, to which he let out a reluctant noise of agreement. Flipping the pages, Hermione found her favourite one and paused, smiling fondly at the blond haired boy who posed sullenly for the camera.

Then she looked at the next picture. Draco followed the direction of her gaze

and snorted. "Cocky wanker," he said, but Hermione detected a faint trace of amusement in his voice when he talked about Theodore Nott. "Believe it or not, he's got the same hairstyle now as he used to have back then."

Hermione chuckled. "Well then...tell him that - that he really needs a haircut."

"I'll be sure to pass your message on."

So later that night, Draco lifted the silencing charms on the door when he went out to get dinner. Hermione pressed her ears against the door, smiling when Draco began the conversation with, "hey, Nott, you need a fucking haircut."

Theo made a dismissive noise.

"Why're you so bloody concerned with my - fuck, Draco, were you thinking

about me when you were inside the room wanking all afternoon?"

Hermione pressed the back of her hand to her lips to suppress her laughter. She heard the sounds of some scuffling and presumed that Draco had well and truly hit that thought out of Theo's head. Several minutes later, he returned with a plate piled full with food. After slamming the door shut, he stared down at Hermione, his expression flat and unamused.

"Told you he was a cocky wanker," Draco muttered, his voice charged with faint aggravation but his features began to soften as she continued to laugh. Her laughter made him momentarily forget about the war and the bleak present and

the blurry future. It reminded him of better days, of sunlight and warmth and everything pleasant and sweet in between.

But if there were better days then there were worse nights. That night was one of the worst ones, because Draco woke to the sound of Hermione sobbing. It wasn't her usual tired or desperate sobbing, it bordered on hysterical and her face was flushed red with the effort of trying to keep her cries in.

Draco hastily recast the muffling charm on the room and woke her up. "You had another nightmare again," he told her, when recognition dawned on her face. But her eyes were wide and frantic and searching, and she quickly reached her

palms up, sliding them up the planes of his cheeks and holding him close.

"Wasn't a nightmare," she rasped softly. Draco resisted the urge to let his eyes fall shut but it was far too easy to lean into her touch. "It - it was different. I have two different kinds of...dreams."

"What kinds of dreams?" He couldn't quite curb his curiosity this time.

"I-I have nightmares of getting...tortured and, and starved and beaten. But the - the terrifying part, is watching you being tortured for finding me. Right before my very eyes."

Draco couldn't stop himself from brushing his thumb quickly across the tears that streaked down her cheeks. "And what about the dreams that make

you cry?"

When she spoke, her voice was so quiet he almost didn't hear her. "Those are the times when you don't find me."

Hermione's eyes flew open when she heard a sudden, sharp bang. Realising that her hand was cold and not holding Draco's, she immediately struggled to sit up, ignoring the faint pang in her abdomen. She glanced to the right, breathing a sigh of relief as she saw Draco.

"Fuck," he was muttering, rubbing his knee with a twisted scowl on his face. She guessed that he'd probably knocked

against the table on the way out.

On the way out.

Her eyes widened when she noticed now that he had a jacket pulled over his jumper, the hood pulled over his head. He turned slightly and paused when he met her hazel eyes in the moonlit room.

"W-where're you going?" Hermione whispered, feeling a shudder wrack itself through her body as she stared up at him with fearful eyes. His jaw was clenched, shoulders squared in an unusual determination and the expression on his face was utterly calm and lethal.

But the look faded as he stepped towards her, sitting on the edge of the bed. "The four of us have to be somewhere tonight," Draco said. "Dark

Lord's orders."

Hermione couldn't stop the painful tightening in her chest. She wasn't just worried for Draco, but for Pansy and Blaise and Theo as well. She'd spent so long listening to them behind the closed door that she hardly wanted anything bad to happen to any of Draco's friends.

"Is it...is it safe?"

"We'll be fine," Draco said instead, before handing her a sleeping draught.

"I'll be back before you wake up."

Nodding unsurely, Hermione sank back against the pillow. She watched him leave, shutting the door gently behind him. She heard faint voices in the living room and after awhile, complete silence. When she was certain that he was gone,

she set down the sleeping draught on the dresser. She turned on her side and stared into the darkness, counting down the hours to his return.

09 | imperio

09

i m p e r i o

Total control over victim.

Draco was the last one to arrive at Azkaban, having directed Pansy and Theo to leave before him. He ignored the expression of annoyance on Alecko Carrow's face and the way Bellatrix was licking someone's blood off her wand. He didn't know whose blood it belonged too and, frankly, didn't want to know

either.

He studied the group of eight in front of him, knowing that Blaise was somewhere far off, hidden by a disillusionment charm. Theo seemed eager - night missions were his favourite; while Pansy stared up at the sky, her eyebrows knitting together as she noticed the Dementors high up above.

"We'll split into two groups," Draco directed, as everyone listened intently. "Nott, Braddock, Rhodes, Parkinson, you're with Bellatrix. Start from the east wing, work your way towards the middle. Donalds, Carrow, Pritchard, you're with me. Keep your eyes peeled for Dolohov - he's the most important

prisoner the Dark Lord wants freed. You know what you have to do," he briefly caught Pansy's eye and she gave a subtle nod. "Let's begin."

Bellatrix was the first to take off, navigating with ease on her broom. The others followed. Draco led his group swiftly to the west wing, steeling himself as he flew discreetly just below the Dementors.

"Don't fuck this up, Donalds," he snapped, steadying Maisie's broom when she swerved. Despite the bold expression on her face, he could tell that she was a bundle of nerves, and the last thing he wanted was the Dementors detecting their presence before they even began.

Behind them, Alecko Carrow chuckled, murmuring something mocking under her breath, and Maisie blushed.

"Sorry." Maisie mumbled, taking a deep breath and focusing on flying. Draco noticed that she kept close to him thereafter, which was better than falling off her broom anyway.

Thank Merlin for the spell that he and Blaise had invented sometime back. It provided a temporary shield to prevent the Dementors from tracking them down, which Draco had surreptitiously cast on the entire group before they even began. Add on to the fact that he, Blaise, Pansy and Theo had dosed themselves with the numbing potion earlier on and this plan was practically foolproof.

Only it wasn't entirely foolproof.

Because the moment Draco and his group landed in the west wing, Alecko Carrow began to frown, her eyes narrowing as she stared at the Dementors floating unperturbed around in the sky outside.

"Strange. They don't usually leave us alone. When MacNair led us the previous time, we were swamped by Dementors within minutes. What the hell did you do - "

Aggravated, Draco hit her with a Silencing curse. He was thoroughly tempted to remove the shield from Carrow and let the Dementors suck the life from her measly body. "You didn't fucking succeed because you couldn't

shut your bloody mouth," he said flatly, leading the way down the dark corridor. There was no need to keep their voices down - all around, the prisoners wailed and howled and made an altogether terrible, despairing atmosphere.

When they finally arrived at the individual prison cells, Draco waved the group off. "Let's split from here. Free as many as you can." Maisie and Alecto went their own separate ways, but Draco frowned when he realised that Graham Pritchard was still standing nearby. "What?"

Graham shrugged. "I'm kind of nervous, mate. Haven't been on a mission like this before."

Draco ignored him and began to undo the

locks on the nearest door. But he didn't tell Graham to leave either. After all, he recognised Graham Pritchard as a fellow Slytherin several years younger. And as much as Slytherins could be arses, they didn't turn their backs on each other.

Blaise had been shadowing Maisie Donalds for sometime now. Knowing that Pansy couldn't possibly reach Maisie in time since she was stuck with the other group, Blaise had taken it upon himself to view her memories instead.

He tried to ignore the screams and cries of the prisoners as he wandered down the corridor, keeping a safe distance away from Maisie. She finished the first row, sending the prisoners on their way with a portkey, and Blaise waited until she turned into a dark alcove before stepping towards her.

Maisie didn't even know what was coming until it hit her. Hit by a body-binding curse from out of nowhere, she felt herself go completely rigid. There was no one around at all and she felt her heart race in fear.

"I do apologise for this," came a deep, warm drawl; before something pointed tapped her forehead lightly. "Legilimens."

Maisie felt her memories flood through her mind all at once. Happy ones, sad ones; good ones, painful ones. She saw her mother rushing down the stairs to hug her after she'd passed her exams with flying colours. She saw her father being killed in the crossfire during the war. And also saw her uncle bringing her to the Dark Lord and encouraging her to receive the dark mark. She saw all those and every other memory in between. It seemed like years of her life just flashed before her very eyes, like a cinematic film with people and events and everything crystal clear. And then it was over in the blink of an eye.

"Thanks for standing so still," the person continued, sounding rather amused.

"Now just relax."

And then he was whispering something in her ear, an incantation that she couldn't quite decipher because he said it so quickly and so smoothly it seemed almost rehearsed.

When Maisie blinked again, she realised that she was sprawled on the floor. She wasn't hurt at all, but she did catch sight of a tiny, traitorous piece of rock nearby. And she thought to herself, I can't believe I tripped again, I'm such a klutz. It was as though the previous minute hadn't happened at all.

Theo had always sworn on Salazar's grave that he could sense danger before it came. He had something like heightened senses - well, apart from Pansy who had the nose of a bloodhound once every full moon - and he firmly believed that was what made him one hell of a fighter.

And so, when he felt the air change, he knew that something was about to happen. He quickly finished unlocking the charms on the door and waved the prisoner out. His lips curled in disgust when the bedraggled woman flung herself on him. With his wand, he quickly shifted her a good distance away, waving several other prisoners

over to take care of her.

He tossed one of them a Portkey. "The Dark Lord wishes to see all of you two days from now. Be sure to know where your loyalties lie."

Without waiting for their response, he strode off, disappearing down the stairwell. He caught a glimpse of the sky outside and realised that he wasn't wrong at all. The Dementors were beginning to gather; their floating bodies descending towards the prison. Tugging on the invisible chain on his neck, he grabbed the phial attached at the bottom and murmured a quick incantation to light it up. The phial began to glow, sharp gleaming embers in the dark.

R U N

Stuffing the phial back into his shirt, he relished the way it burned against his skin. It was just the right amount of heat, a slight stinging but definitely bearable pain. It was like playing with fire but never getting burnt.

Zippering up his jacket to hide the glowing phial, he descended down the stairs, ignoring the cries of the other prisoners on the way down. Dolohov. He needed to get Antonin Dolohov, one of the top-ranking Death-Eaters, or this mission would've been all for nothing.

He paused at the bottom step when a

Dementor floated by and held his breath. Draco had said that Dementors were completely blind, but that only meant their other senses were strong as hell. He wasn't going to take any bloody chances.

Once the Dementor had passed, Theo slipped silently down the corridor, casting Sonorus spells on arbitrary prisoners to mask his own footfalls. But he was waylaid when one prisoner in particular called out for him.

"Please, just let me out," the man said. His face was cleaner than most, eyes more lucid and sane. Theo quickly deduced that he hadn't been imprisoned for long. "I can't bear another second in here."

Theo gazed at him calmly. "Tell me where Antonin Dolohov is."

"I-I can't remember," the man stuttered.

"I saw him sometime ago, I think he was

- "

"Not good enough," said Theo, pointing his wand calmly at the man's temple.

"Legilimens."

In a flash, he saw the man watching as Antonin Dolohov was dragged off downstairs. That much Theo managed to get from a hurried Legilimency. He had no doubt Draco or Pansy or Blaise could do much better, but he was a fighter, not a bloody mind-reader.

After freeing the man and handing him a portkey, Theo hurried off before the man could reply. He stopped when he spotted

a familiar mop of untameable hair. Bellatrix was skipping down the corridor, happily freeing other prisoners and handing out portkeys.

"Lestrangle!" Bellatrix whirled round wildly, and he gestured her over. "Dolohov's in the basement. The Dementors are coming."

Bellatrix simply grinned, following Theo down at a more leisurely pace, letting out short barks of laughter every now and then. She wasn't afraid and Theo knew why. Draco had told him that normal Dark Wizards like Bellatrix didn't need to be afraid of the Dementors, because they were just as evil.

The very fact that he, Draco, Blaise,

Pansy and several other Death-Eaters were deathly terrified of Dementors could only mean one thing - that they just weren't plain evil. Not yet, anyway.

Theo took a strange sort of comfort in knowing that.

Run. Run. Run.

The phial hanging on Pansy's neck seemed to burn hotter than ever. The sharp stinging heat was only a figment of her imagination but she hated it. It was making her feel irrational bouts of panic, panic that the Dementors would

absolutely feed off if the numbing spell and protective shield wore off. She had a feeling it already did, thanks to the tiny traitorous object pressed against her abdomen.

She'd already used Legilimency on Malcolm Braddock and Guthrie Rhodes. Draco had told her not to touch Bellatrix because she was both lethal and formidable, and her mind was locked up tight.

So that only left Alecko Carrow and Maisie Donalds. They were both in Draco's group, and Pansy had to travel across the entire building to get to them; but she hadn't caught a glimpse of either. She unlocked doors on the way, tossing out portkeys to every tenth prisoner she

met and hoping that they'd have the sense to escape before the Dementors came descending towards them.

There was only one problem. She didn't have a portkey, and she only realised it mere minutes ago, when she found that the key she'd kept for herself had fallen out of her pocket by accident. She had been searching for her fellow Death-Eaters or prisoners since then, hoping to find someone who could get her the hell out of her.

Apparition was out of the question. Azkaban's anti-apparition wards were locked tighter than even Bellatrix's mind. And then she stopped when she finally saw them.

Tall, black, ghastly figures that were

flying across the courtyard. The shield had long evaporated and as she felt a slow surge of fear grip her heart, she knew that the numbing spell was wearing out too.

Mumbling under her breath, she cast another numbing spell on herself. But her fingers were shaking terribly and the incantation was weak. And when she rounded the corner, a scream caught in her throat as she came face to face with a Dementor.

She held her wand out in front of herself protectively. "Expecto Patronum!"

It came out weak, a small, sudden burst just enough to frighten that one away. But then there were more behind it. Faceless grim reapers looming ominously in front

of her, far too many to count.

Pansy froze.

"Parkinson!" It was Theo, who was on the stairwell on the adjacent building. He was with Bellatrix and they were struggling to carry a prisoner between them. He looked deathly pale, frightened not for himself but for her. "Get out of there!"

His words spun her into action and she gripped her wand tightly. She cast out another faint white light in front of her, dispersing two more Dementors, before turning on her heels and running for her life.

Draco ignored the heat on his phials as he trailed Alecko Carrow down the hallway. She was a sneaky one, undoing the locks quickly and slipping off before he could even properly corner her.

When he approached the next stairwell, he came face to face with a Dementor. Casting another numbing spell on himself, he stood silently, waiting until the Dementor had floated past before continuing on his way.

Where the fuck was that woman?

The corridors were now empty by then, since he'd freed all the prisoners at a rapid pace, and he had no doubt some of the other Death-Eaters were equally as

proficient in undoing locks. Then he heard a faint noise from the other end and he rushed over, catching a glimpse of a stringy ginger hair before Alecto Carrow ran off.

He was so caught up in Alecto Carrow that he didn't see the shadow behind him, or the flash of light shooting out from the person's wand.

"Incarcerous!"

And then Draco felt thick ropes wind round his body, squeezing the life out of him. He stumbled to his knees, dropping his wand along the way and was dragged out of the shadows, coming face to face with a familiar person.

Graham Pritchard let a slow cruel smirk curve his lips as he stared down at

Draco. "Always watch your back, Malfoy."

"Pansy!"

The call came from the other end of the corridor. Pansy halted momentarily, eyes widening when she saw Maisie Donalds beckoning her over frantically. In her hands was Pansy's ticket out - a portkey. Without a moment's hesitation, Pansy immediately sprinted over to the other girl, but slowed when Dementors approached Maisie from the other end. "Maisie, watch your back!" Pansy

yelled, and the girl whirled round, holding out her wand protectively as the black figures flew over swiftly. Quick as thought, Pansy flung out another defensive spell to protect Maisie from far away. "Expecto Patronum!"

But you couldn't cast one without happy thoughts and happiness was the farthest thing from Pansy's mind at that moment. She continued to run towards Maisie but stopped abruptly when she realised that there was no way she could make it in time without the Dementors reaching Maisie first.

"Go," Pansy ordered the girl. "Get the hell out of here!"

Maisie's eyes widened. "But - "
"Leave! Now!"

Giving one last desperate look around, Maisie gave up and vanished with the portkey.

And then Pansy was left alone, with the blackness closing in. Steeling herself, she casted several Patronus charms one after another, but they were close, far too close, and she could see them, feel them feeding off her fear. Several of them were mere steps away, lowering their bodies to get closer to her face. She bit back her lip to hold off a terrified scream as she braced herself and waited for them to suck every positive memory she ever harboured in her mind.

Only the Dementors never came, because a blinding flash came from the right, blasting a hoard of them away.

And Pansy let out a shuddering breath of relief when she saw a familiar wolf-shaped Patronus charging through the foray, dispersing Dementors in every different direction.

She glanced over, only to see Blaise grinning widely, tossing his wand flippantly in his hand. "You're welcome."

"I knew I dated you for a reason," she returned, before going straight into his arms, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to his jaw. "Believe me, you haven't seen my gratitude yet. I shall repay you in full, you can be rest-assured of that."

Blaise's eyebrows shot up, an intrigued smile playing on his lips as he eagerly held out a Portkey. "Let's go then."

"What about Draco? Theo?"

"Theo's gone with Bellatrix and Dolohov. I saw Draco a good half-hour ago, and I haven't seen anyone else since."

Pansy hesitated. She knew Draco could take care of himself but she worried because he couldn't cast a Patronus. And she worried even more when she thought of the brown-haired, wide-eyed girl in his room possibly waiting up all night for him.

"Stick to the plan, baby," Blaise added, casting a wary eye around for any incoming Dementors.

As much as she didn't want to, Pansy knew that Blaise was right. Draco's plans were naturally foolproof; he was a

natural-born leader and things had only gone awry because she'd lost her bloody Portkey.

Smiling up at Blaise, she grabbed the Portkey and slipped her hand through his with the other.

Draco didn't even wince as Graham shot another singing hex at him; this time sending a sharp, searing pain on his chest, barely missing his heart by several inches. The bloody ropes were cutting into him, slicing their way through his skin, but Draco could hardly

care less. All he was looking for was the bloody wand he'd dropped earlier.

"They've been keeping an eye on you for a bloody long time," Graham spat, flinging another hex at him, but Draco's ears were pricked.

This was the person they were looking for. Not Alecto Carrow.

"They?" Draco demanded boldly, "who are they?"

Graham halted. And Draco took the opportunity to loosen his hand from the rope, silently summoning his wand over to him. He quickly undid the ropes from around him before getting up and storming over to Graham, fury glinting in his silver eyes.

"Who the hell are you working for,

Pritchard?"

"Expelliarmus!"

Draco didn't flinch as the curse practically bounced off him. Thank Merlin for his idea and Blaise's wisdom. "Try again, wanker," he growled, still heading for Graham, who was flinging hex after hex after him. With his wand, Draco deflected them easily; each and every single one of them.

Graham's eyes narrowed. "Imperio!"

"Not the killing curse?" Draco drawled, reaching over and grabbing Graham by the collar of his shirt. "What a fucking pity." Draco quickly disarmed him, before clocking him on the nape of his neck swiftly.

Graham was immediately out like a

light, collapsing onto the floor in a heap. But Draco didn't have long, because out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Dementors swarming towards him, like bees to a hive. Hastily yanking the portkey from the pocket of his jacket, Draco placed Graham's hand on it and transported them out of Azkaban.

Unlike the other portkeys, the silver coloured portkey Draco had led them back to the apartment instead of the outskirts of Azkaban. And it wasn't until Draco reached the apartment that he felt

his knees give out beneath him. He dropped Graham on the floor before collapsing himself, amidst horrified gasps from Pansy and Blaise. Only Theo had the sense to support him before he could completely fall over.

"What the hell happened?" Theo demanded, leading him over to the nearest chair, and Pansy hovered anxiously near them. Blaise immediately hurried into the kitchen to grab some healing potions.

Draco narrowed his eyes at Graham, who was lying in an unmoving heap on the floor. "Fucking Pritchard tried to use the Imperius curse on me. I suspect he's working for someone. Tie him up, I need to use Legilimency on him."

Theo immediately did the necessary steps, levitating Graham to the nearest chair and binding him magically with ropes; while Pansy dashed into the storage room to get phials. When they were gone, Draco couldn't help but sneak a glance over at his room. He wondered if the muffling spells had worn off and if Hermione could hear every word that was said.

"Draco," Blaise came out of the kitchen, his eyebrows knitted with worry as he handed Draco a cup of green liquid. Draco immediately drank. "You should really get some rest, let us handle this."

"I'm fine."

But he really wasn't. Draco hadn't noticed it earlier, being so pent up with

fury directed at Graham that he didn't feel his injuries. But he clearly felt it now - hot, stinging welts on his body from the multiple hexes and a possible sprained ankle when Graham first hit him with an Incarcerous spell.

"Blaise's right," Theo said, settling down next to Draco. His stance was almost protective, and he kept watching Graham out of the corner of his eye. "You don't look good, mate."

"I'm fine."

Pansy came back out with the phials and Draco stood, ignoring the way his body ached painfully with the effort. Striding over to Graham, he held the wand to his temple, casting a wordless Legilimens. Graham's memories immediately

flooded his mind and Draco found himself practically seething as he analysed the important bits.

Looking up, he realised that the other three were watching him with anxious faces. He grabbed the empty phial from Pansy and began to pull Graham's memories out. "Yaxley placed him under an Imperius curse, with the direct orders to put me under one as well," Draco said flatly, handing the phial back to Pansy when he was done. "You three can view it in your own spare time."

They were all silent, until Theo cleared his throat. "Right. So what're we going to do with him?"

Draco didn't answer. He turned back to Graham, before bringing the wand to the

boy's forehead. Quietly, his words a mere mumble, he began to lift the Imperius curse. It took a good three minutes, but gradually, Graham's shoulders seemed to slacken, his head dipping down in a more comfortable position. He still remained unconscious. When Draco was finally done, he took a step back. "The curse is gone. You two," he pointed at Pansy and Blaise. "Obliviate the incident at Azkaban and plant a fake one instead - I want him to believe that Yaxley tried to kill him. And you," he turned to Theo, who immediately sat up straighter. "Send him back home."

Theo's mouth fell open. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Do I look like I'm fucking kidding?"

"Well, that's true. But - " Theo's scowled at the sleeping boy, his eyes narrowing in annoyance. " - let's just dump him somewhere. Oh, let's put him back at Azkaban."

Draco shrugged dismissively and headed towards his room. "Do what you want. I'm done for the night - "

"Draco, wait," Blaise stopped him, laying a concerned hand on Draco's shoulder. "I could look over your injuries if you want; make sure there's no internal bleeding."

"It's fine, I just need sleep."

"But - "

"Blaise, baby, let Draco sleep," Pansy interjected, smiling at Blaise in a sultry

manner. "I do believe we have some unfinished business here, and I don't mean anything to do with Graham."

Draco levelled her a look, which she returned with a surreptitious wink. Before anyone could stop him, he disappeared back into his room, shutting the door behind him. Pansy glanced round at the three other boys in the room, before clapping her hands swiftly. "Right, let's get to work."

"I can't believe we're not going to do something to him," grumbled Theo, collapsing down on the sofa.

Blaise gazed at him with interest. "Like what?"

"...something Death-Eatery."

"That's brilliant. First-rate idea. All hail

the clever Theodore Nott."

"Fine, how about an Avada? Clever enough for you?" Theo began to sit up, aiming his wand at the sleeping Graham, only for Pansy to smack him on the head.

"Draco said to send him back home. And if Draco wants to show kindness to someone who's supposedly an enemy then who are we to stop him? Besides, Pritchard was under the Imperius curse. He didn't know better."

"Pritchard?" Theo snorted in derision.

"More like Prat-chard."

Blaise's lips twisted upwards in amusement. "Now that's clever."

10 | brackium

1 0

b r a c k i u m e m e n d o

Mends bones.

Draco couldn't help but wince when he saw the look of horror on Hermione's face when she saw him. He was wrong to presume that she had been asleep. The phial of sleeping draught was sitting on the dresser completely untouched, which could only mean that Hermione had spent the past few hours waiting for him. No wonder she looked a complete wreck - eyes puffy, nose runny and hair

frizzled in every different direction.

Not that he looked that much better. He definitely wasn't a sight for sore eyes now.

"Draco," Hermione gasped, immediately scrambling off the bed and making her way to him. She almost tripped on the way over, and he had to reach forward, grabbing her round the waist to steady her. She was warm, her body heat spreading through him like a glow as she unconsciously leaned into him. Her fingers reached for his face but she paused, hardly daring to touch the scratches. "What happened?"

Draco shook his head. "I got attacked."

"By who - no, wait, that's not important. Sit down," she hastily pulled him

towards the bed, her hands gripping tightly onto his shoulders to push him down. "You have to get those cuts fixed and - "

She disappeared into the bathroom quickly. Draco stared after her, his breath caught in his throat and hardly able to believe his eyes. She wasn't even stammering. Merlin, she sounded so like her old self - organised and level-headed and...

" - you'll be fine, Draco," she re-emerged from the bathroom, a wet towel in hand. Her face was alight with fear and determination all at once. She looked every bit the tenacious Gryffindor she had once been, but different all the same - because never

once had her concern been directed at him before in the past.

And that made a world of difference.

Hermione quickly settled next to him on the bed, pressing the warm towel against his face to clean the cuts and scratches. Her movements were steady and assured, and Draco couldn't quite take his eyes off her.

"You'll be fine," she repeated calmly, her eyes still brimming with unshed tears but she spoke without a single bit of hesitation. Once she was done with his face, she moved on to his arms. Her eyes caught the awkward angle his foot was turned in and she quickly knelt down and reached for it. "Did you sprain it?"

Draco was hardly ever left speechless,

but this was one of those rare few times. Wordlessly, he nodded.

"We have to ice it then," Hermione rushed back into the bathroom. Several moments later, she came back out with a new towel and a basin of water. "Freeze this please," she lifted the basin towards him.

Draco stared at her for awhile, then at the basin, and then back to her; an idea suddenly forming in his head. He shook his head slowly. "No."

"What? Draco, you have to - "

"You do it."

Instantly, he saw Hermione shrink back, her eyes widening with apprehension.

"W-what?"

Draco reached for the spare wand on the

dresser, ignoring the pain shooting through his ribs with that single action, and held it out to her. "Go on."

"N-no! I can't - I can't do magic anymore - "

"Granger," he pinned her with a levelled look. "I'm in a fucking lot of pain right now and I think my rib is cracked. You had better fix this before I die on you."

Her mouth fell open in horror. "Don't say that!" She grabbed the wand from him unthinkingly, and reached forward to lift his bloodied shirt.

Draco pulled it over his head easily, tossing it aside and showing her the general area of his bruised ribs, before gesturing with his hands the movement for the healing spell. "Brackium

Emendo."

He watched intently as Hermione murmured the words under her breath, making sure she pronounced it correctly before she held the wand to his abdomen. "Brackium Emendo."

She said it so smoothly and easily; it was almost like she was back at Hogwarts practicing spells. Draco was so captivated by the fierce determination on her face and the uninhibited worry in her eyes that he didn't notice the magic flow through the wand and seep into his skin. Then he felt a scorching, searing pain as the crack in his ribs sealed itself together and he couldn't quite stop the expletive from slipping past his lips. "Fuck."

Hermione instantly drew back in fright, dropping the wand down and gasping. "Did I hurt you? I-I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to, I - "

"Hermione, it's fine," he quickly reached forward to pull her back, curling his finger gently round her shoulders. "My ribs are fine now. The spell worked."

Her eyes grew round and she absentmindedly reached over to drag her fingertips lightly across his ribs. He automatically sucked in a deep breath, his muscles automatically contracting under her touch. Not because of the pain - there was none, and if there were any, it had all been forgotten - but because of the iciness of her skin, the way they lit his nerve-ends on fire in their wake.

Fire and ice. Nothing had ever felt quite so pleasurable before, and all from a single, brief touch.

"The spell worked?"

Draco dragged his eyes back to her face and saw the expression of surprise and wonderment in her eyes. "Yes."

"Oh," and then an indescribable joy came over her, her lips curling into the widest smile and her eyes dancing shades of gold in the moonlight. She reached forward to grasp his hands, interlacing her fingers with his easily, "I'm so glad the spell worked, I'm so glad you're alright."

Fascinated by the light in her eyes and the turn of her lips, Draco instinctively lifted his palm to her face. Her skin was

smooth under his calloused palm and she automatically leaned into his touch, letting out a tiny sigh slip past her lips. Her scent invaded his senses, it was familiar, a fresh, sweet scent that he could practically taste; and when her eyes flickered briefly down to his lips, something just clicked, something just fell into place. And so when she tightened her grip on his hand, he drew closer and her eyelids fluttered shut, lashes fanning out against her high cheekbones. He leaned in but as her unsteady breath glossed his skin, he blinked.

And the moment was lost.

Draco immediately veered back, his chest tightening painfully as he took

several deep breaths to calm himself and swore in his head. For Merlin's sake, what the fuck was that?

Hermione's gaze was confused and faintly disappointed, like she had been waiting, anticipating for something, anything to happen. But he banished that thought quickly and picked up the wand from the floor and held it out to her.

"You still haven't learnt the other healing spells yet."

She smiled faintly, before shaking her head. "I-I don't think I can, Draco. I don't want to - that was just...once and what if I don't, w-what if the second - "

"It's fine," he quickly hushed her and set the wand back on the dresser. "You did well, Granger."

"Hermione," she reminded him, her brown eyes kind and understanding, and Draco didn't know how she did that.

He didn't understand how she seemed to know that whenever he was calling her 'Granger' instead of 'Hermione', and it wasn't for teasing purposes, then it simply meant that he was trying to back away because he'd gotten too damned close for his own good, that he was becoming far too fucking attached and he couldn't let it happen.

"I'll still try to mend your ankle, though," Hermione continued softly. "Through conventional, muggle methods." She lifted the basin to him.

This time, he froze the water without another word.

He watched as she went to work, breaking the ice in the basin and stuffing it into the towel before icing his ankle. He felt the chill seep into his bones and silently berated himself for being such a fucking prick through and through.

He didn't know what Hermione wanted - well, actually, he could hazard a guess and he'd guessed for quite awhile now - but he couldn't give it to her. He wasn't that person she thought he was, the person who supposedly 'saved' her, the person who was innately good.

But he knew better than anyone else that he fucking wasn't.

Instead, he was just that thick-headed bully he used to be back at Hogwarts, just a more frightening, more lethal,

weaponised version of his old self. And there were too many monsters inside his head and there were too many monsters out there in the world that he had to get rid of. He was a massive fuck-up, he was evil and he was a Death-Eater; while she was the one pure, unblemished spot in this fucked-up world, and he couldn't destroy her.

Because he would. He knew he would. Eventually.

So he sat unmoving as she cleaned his cuts and iced his bruises. Her concern was humbling and he stared at the furrow on her forehead and traced the faint scar curving down the side of her face with his eyes as she worked. When she was done, she pushed him gently

down onto the bed, pulling the covers over him.

"Go to sleep," she whispered. She leaned over him, brushed the blond locks out of his eyes and pressed her lips to his forehead. He stifled an involuntary shiver but couldn't keep his eyes from falling shut. She pulled away far too quickly and settled on his chair. "Goodnight, Draco."

She reached for his hand but he flinched away, turning on his side to face the wall instead. He could practically feel her sad eyes watching him, boring holes into his head.

Sleep wasn't going to come easy tonight.

The streets of Whitehall were deserted in the morning, with pale buildings and empty roads and the echo of the wind ricocheting off the pavements. Blaise stood at the junction, leaning against the lamppost with a bored expression on his face as he pretended to be engrossed in the newspaper he was holding. But every now and then, he cast a sharp gaze around in search for something, or someone.

Finally, after a good twenty-minute wait, Blaise straightened and strode quickly towards the man who had just exited the building opposite. "Pritchard," Blaise greeted cordially, when he was within earshot. But his hand was gripping the

wand in his pocket tightly, just in case. Graham Pritchard jumped in fright, before whirling around, his eyes wide and guarded. He stared at Blaise suspiciously before nodding, "Zabini." Blaise grinned. "Little jumpy there. Everything alright, mate?" Graham nodded far too quickly. "Yes, of course." He resumed his swift pace but Blaise had no trouble in keeping up with him.

"Listen," Blaise began, his voice low. "I know you're in trouble."

Graham froze. "What?"

"Yaxley's trying to kill you, I know that."

"How did you - "

Because we planted the bloody memory in your head. "Because we've been

tracking Yaxley," Blaise said instead. "He's a sly one. Got a lot of people on his hit list. You're one of them."

"We?" Graham frowned. "Who's we?"

"That's a secret. But we've got your back, Pritchard. You don't have to worry about anything."

"Well, thank Merlin," Graham breathed in relief, before turning to Blaise. "The bastard tried to kill me last night in Azkaban. Someone used a portkey and got me out in time, but I blacked out after that. One of you, I presume?"

"Yes. Like I said, we've got your back. Now I hope you've got ours?"

"Of course," Graham didn't miss a beat. Blaise grinned. This was too fucking easy. "What do you need help with?"

"Nothing much. Just keep your eyes and ears peeled for new information, if you happen to catch any. And always watch your back," Blaise added, before stepping away and waving a quick goodbye. "Catch you later, Pritchard."

"You too, Zabini. Thanks for the help."

Blaise watched Pritchard disappear into the next building. Draco had once again steered them in the right direction. By planting in that fake memory and going to double check on him the morning after, they were now certain that Graham was on the look out for Yaxley or any potential murderers on the loose. He was now quite unwittingly on their side. Which was a good thing, of course. The more people they had on their side, the

better. Draco and Theo might enjoy the tight circle, refusing to trust anyone apart from the people living in their apartment, but Blaise always figured that it couldn't hurt to get one or two more allies. Just in case.

When Blaise returned back to the apartment, he found the place empty, along with a note on the kitchen counter from Pansy addressed to him.

Gone to the black market. D and T gone to shag.

Blaise let out a snort of laughter. He and

Pansy had a bet going on for years now that Draco and Theo had a little thing going on at the side. It wasn't entirely implausible - Theo seemed to look up to Draco a lot, and Draco had a soft spot for Theo and had personally trained him when he first started out as a Death-Eater. Pansy figured that Theo's countless slags and Draco's isolation was just a cover for their mutual attraction.

Blaise, on the other hand, simply scoffed at the idea. Theo might be a little open to some kink, but Blaise had grown up with Draco and knew him well. Draco was just that sullen, and he'd been this way ever since he became a Death-Eater. Anyway, the bet had died down for

awhile now. But Pansy and Blaise still used 'gone to shag' as a sort of code for when Draco and Theo headed out together, whether to get drunk or to go on a mission.

It was for the best, Blaise quickly decided. The house was quiet, a much-needed silence in hectic times like these. He loved Pansy to death but the girl could chatter a mile a minute. Blaise decided to brew potions to restock their shelves. It wouldn't hurt, especially during a war, where every mission sent you straight into various death traps.

Blaise got out the phials and ingredients, rearranging them on the kitchen counter as he'd done dozens of times before. Then he went back into his room to get

his potion books, emerging with seven books altogether, but the eighth was still missing.

It was probably with Draco.

Letting out a lengthy sigh, Blaise headed for Draco's room. He didn't have any difficulty undoing the locks. Several months ago, he, Pansy and Theo had gathered in front of Draco's door and figured out the locks on their own. They'd felt pretty damned accomplished soon after, but thought it would be best to pretend to Draco that they didn't know anything.

Although, Blaise wouldn't put it past Draco to have already figured out that they all knew. He was just bloody clever that way - a far different kind of clever

from Blaise; not the kind based on knowledge but on intuition.

Blaise finally finished undoing the locks, and he pushed the door open, stepping into the room. He noticed that the bed was unmade, properly slept in, and there was a leather armchair beside the bed. That little detail detail made him frown, because it almost seemed like someone had sat next to the bed the previous night.

Maybe Theo.

Merlin, was Pansy actually right about Draco and Theo?

Shaking his head in amusement, Blaise wandered further into the room, using wandless magic to open the doors of Draco's impressive library. He was

waylaid when he found a classic that he'd once studied in Hogwarts but had forgotten over time. After scanning the first few pages, Blaise laid it on the table, intending to borrow it along with the potions book.

But then he paused when he heard a sudden, unexpected shuffle. Years of working as a Death-Eater had made him alert to sounds, even if he wasn't alert as Draco or Theo.

Blaise took a step back from the table, turning to scan the room briefly. Maybe he was just overthinking things, as usual, but Blaise figured it was better to be cautious. He went straight into the bathroom, checking behind the door and shower curtain. He looked behind the

shelves and under the desk and, finally, under the bed.

And he almost collapsed with shock when he saw familiar brown eyes blinking in the darkness under the bed. A face he hadn't seen since his Hogwarts days. A face he'd assumed was long missing because everyone said she was dead. A face he figured was never going to appear in his apartment, because his flatmate used to hate her with every fibre of his being.

"Shit!" Blaise blurted, his eyes widening to the size of saucers.

Hermione Granger smiled weakly up at him. "H-hello, Blaise."

Hermione watched nervously as Blaise pace the room, his face flushed with excitement and curiosity. He ran a hand through his hair rapidly, murmuring under his breath, "I can't believe it."

And then he turned to her. She swallowed, her throat feeling particularly dry.

"How long have you been staying in this apartment?"

Hermione did a rapid count in her head. It took awhile for her to come up with the exact figure, so she had to give a rough estimate. "Just - just over three weeks."

"Three weeks? Well, I'll be damned. Draco sure knows how to keep a secret,"

Blaise shook his head, laughing in disbelief. "And where've you been all this while?"

Hermione's mood dipped immediately. She began to feel her heart bang painfully against her chest, and she fisted her fingers tightly on the pillow beside her. "I - I don't really want...to..."

"Oh, it's fine," Blaise hurriedly backtracked. "You don't have to tell me that. I'm just glad to see you, Hermione." She smiled, feeling rather pleased. "Really?"

"Yeah. Might be kind of a shocker, since us Slytherins don't naturally get along with you Gryffindors. But in a war, it's just good to see anyone, really. And I never hated you the way Draco did, by

the way. I never hated you at all."

"I-I don't think anyone hated me the way Draco used to," Hermione chuckled.

Blaise laughed in agreement. "It's just good to have you back. The Order thought you were dead, did you know that?" He sat on the desk opposite Hermione, pushing the books aside, his initial interest in them all but forgotten.

"Draco says the Order disintegrated after the war, but apparently, they've been rebuilding it recently. The Order's going to be psyched to have you back - "

Hermione's smile faded.

" - I can honestly say for sure that Potter and Weasley will want you fighting by their side. Because without you, they're a brainless duo. But you're going to come

up with fantastic strategies and I have no doubt that you'll be - " Blaise trailed off as he suddenly noticed the way Hermione visibly paled. "What's wrong?"

"I - " she sounded faint.

Blaise immediately jumped off the desk. "Shit, Hermione. I apologise for what I said, do you not want to talk about - "

"Well, you sure do have all the tact in the world."

Blaise and Hermione immediately turned, only to see Pansy leaning against the doorframe. She was watching them with amusement, her arms folded comfortably across her chest. Her lack of surprise made Blaise's mouth fall open as he quickly put two and two

together.

"Wait, you know about Hermione?"

Pansy ignored him, instead smiling cheerfully at Hermione. "Morning, Hermione. I see you've met my tactless boyfriend and I can assure you that nothing like this will ever happen again - especially if I have a say in it. Draco will be back in a half hour."

Blaise watched as Hermione visibly brightened, her shoulders relaxing and her lips curling upwards in a faint but happy smile. He also noticed that she was wearing one of Draco's jumpers and had a phial dangling on a familiar-looking chain around her neck. His eyebrows shot up.

"Would you like some breakfast?" Pansy

glanced out to the living room and waved a hand, sending a brown package flying over. She reached inside and pulled out an English muffin, along with a packet of jam.

Hermione took it from her gratefully and Pansy smiled at the girl. Then she reached for her boyfriend, looping her arm aggressively through his and dragging him towards the door.

"Pansy?"

Both Pansy and Blaise stopped, turning back slowly. Hermione was watching them, her eyes soft and gaze open.

"Y-you can show him."

Pansy stilled, before nodding slowly. "If that's what you want."

Hermione smiled faintly. "It is."

"Show me what - " Blaise began, but Pansy yanked him out with a newfound force. He only barely managed to grab the Classic book before Pansy was shutting the door, redoing Draco's locks on it. Once outside, Blaise took the brown paper bag from her, his face falling as he realised it was completely empty.

"Where's my breakfast?"

Pansy didn't even glance at Blaise as she pulled him into the room where they kept their inventory. "I gave your breakfast to Hermione, you git. As a formal apology for what you said." She locked their door, casting muffling charms on the room. When she was done, she turned to him with a glare. "You."

"Me what?"

"If I wasn't so in love with you right now I'd be hexing you left and right. How did you find Hermione?"

Blaise shrugged and sat down on the nearest stool. "I went in to borrow a book from Draco's library. How did you find out about her?" He levelled her an accusatory glare, which she returned evenly.

"I sniffed her out. I have heightened senses, remember? And I caught her scent on Draco. It was practically overpowering."

"You caught her scent - wait," Blaise's eyes narrowed. "That was more than two weeks ago! And you knew and didn't tell me?"

"Baby, you're the last person among the lot of us who should find out about Hermione. And that includes Theo," she added firmly, when he opened his mouth to argue. "You're excited about the Order and can't wait for the war to end - I know; but don't you see that Hermione just can't handle it right now? Oh - " Pansy inhaled sharply. "Draco will be so furious when he finds out."

"Let me deal with Draco," Blaise hastily assured her, knowing that his calm demeanour was probably going to be the best way to appease Draco when he was in one of his moods. "But about Hermione - what happened to her? She's so...different."

"Well - " Pansy paused, before going to

the shelves and rummaging through the phials. "What happened to her, that's not something she can actually phrase into words. I've viewed her memories - and neither can I, for that matter. Too bloody painful. Here," Pansy finally located a box; well concealed at the back and in it lay a single phial. "She said it was alright for you to view it, so go ahead."

Reaching up a hesitant hand, Blaise took it. He paused, gazing at Pansy. The tight, sombre expression on her face made him almost nervous.

She gestured to the Pensieve in the corner. "Go ahead."

Blaise headed towards the Pensieve. He uncapped the phial, watching as a stream of silver trickled down into the bowl.

Bracing his arms on the side, he took a deep breath and went in.

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a l o h o m o r a

Unlocking charm.

When Draco returned home that night, he paused by the doorway when he saw Blaise sitting alone in the living room. His friend was chugging a bottle of Firewhisky - a highly unusual sight since Blaise was the least inclined out of them to drown his sorrows in alcohol.

Blaise noticed Draco watching him out of the corner of his eye and grinned. "Hey, mate, join me?"

Draco nodded, shutting the door behind him and going over to sit in the chair adjacent to Blaise's. Blaise tossed him a bottle and he caught it easily. "Where're the other two?"

"Theodore went to call on one of his slags again," Blaise returned dismissively, before gesturing vaguely to Draco's room. "And Pansy's in there with Hermione."

Draco visibly jolted in surprise and Blaise chuckled. It wasn't often he could get a kick out of Draco's normally indifferent behaviour, and he was thoroughly enjoying this. Although not as much as he liked; because the things he'd seen earlier that day were still flooding his mind like a tidal wave never quite

ebbing away.

When Draco spoke, his voice was guarded. "So you - "

" - found her? Yeah. I went in to borrow a book from you and found her hiding under the bed. By the way, you should really change those locks on your door."

"It's fucking pointless; the three of you would stand in front of my door puzzling over the locks until you figure them out."

Blaise grinned. So his suspicions had been right after all. Draco knew all this while but believed they would respect his privacy. In fact, Blaise was almost certain that Draco knew all the locks on their doors as well. He just didn't barge in as and when he liked, as the rest of them so often did.

"I viewed her memories," Blaise said, after a moment's pause. Draco's eyes flew to his, the expression in them hard and almost dangerous. So this was what Pansy had meant when she said he'd be furious. "She told Pansy I could, so Pansy gave me the phial."

"How bad were they?"

Blaise's eyes widened. "You mean you haven't seen it?" When Draco shook his head, Blaise frowned. "Aren't you even the slightest bit curious?"

"Of course I fucking am. I just - " Draco's eyes shuttered momentarily, before he met Blaise's gaze evenly. " - I don't know if I want to see them. I can't decide if I want her to tell me either. I just - I don't know if I actually want to

fucking risk knowing."

"Because you're terrified of the guilt," Blaise finished. "You've spent years searching for her and you're scared to see what happened to her throughout the time when you couldn't find her. It's not your fault, mate. You tried. We all did."

Draco looked at him in surprise.

Blaise smiled. "You think I didn't notice? Draco, for years, you told us our task was to search for informants, whether it was traitors to the Order or to the Dark Lord. Pansy and Theo may have bought whatever bullshit you fed them, but I never did. If searching for informants was really to help the Order, then the bloody Order would have been fighting back by now. Instead all we did was to

prevent either side from knowing too much about each other. Not much progress, if you ask me. So of course I knew you were just trying to get information to find someone. Didn't know it was Hermione Granger, though." Draco sighed. "Sorry for wasting your time."

"Don't apologise, mate, you did the right thing. Finding Hermione is the best thing that could happen for the Order. That way, she can go back to Potter and Weasley. Maybe give them hope and some fighting spirit."

Draco didn't reply. The silence stretched long and thin between them, and Blaise finally smiled wryly.

"You don't want her to go back to the

Order, do you?"

"She's not in a good shape, Zabini. She can barely recall anything about the bloody Order."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that out on my own." Draco shot him a look of aggravation and Blaise smiled sheepishly, before sobering up. "Pansy and I agree on one thing, though. We both think that Hermione should go back to Potter and the Order. We're selfish that way - we want the war to end. And if bringing Hermione back is the way to do it - then we're placing our bets on her. We just want her to get better."

"And you think I don't fucking want that?" Draco fixed stormy eyes on Blaise, his lips curled in frustration.

Blaise was almost intrigued by the myriad of emotions on his face. "Fuck, Zabini, I want her to get better. But if it comes at the price of going back to the bloody Order and putting her life in danger - "

"I didn't say that Pansy and I wanted her to fight for the Order. I've seen what Hermione's been through and," Blaise drew in a deep, shuddering breath, "I'm with you on that. I think she needs to stay out of the battlefield."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but Pansy stepped out of his room at that moment, her eyes alight with worry. She shut the door carefully, placing a quick muffling charm and looked at them.

"She's been worrying about you," Pansy

said, and Draco immediately stood up, setting the bottle of Firewhisky down. "She wants to know if your ankle's better. I think you should go in."

Draco quickly strode towards his room. But just before he could open the door, Blaise's voice cut into the thick silence. "Draco."

He paused, glancing slightly over his shoulder. Blaise was surveying him with an air of curiosity, but the gravity of his tone made Draco brace himself for what he had to say.

"Are you really afraid of her going back to the Order, or are you afraid of her remembering everything about her friends and then forgetting everything about you?"

Draco didn't answer. Squaring his shoulders, he opened the door to his room, slipped in and shutting it quickly behind him.

Pansy turned to Blaise. And when he patted the empty spot next to him, she quickly went and sat, curling against him and taking Draco's bottle of Firewhisky, lifting it to her lips. She placed it back down after two gulps. "So did you notice?"

"Notice what?"

She rolled her eyes. "That Draco fancies Hermione."

Blaise smirked. "I don't think fancy's a proper word for it anymore. Works both ways, too."

Draco found Hermione waiting anxiously for him in the room. She immediately clambered out of bed and headed towards him, concerned lines knitting on her forehead.

"Are you feeling better?" He froze when she reached for him, her fingers curling firmly around the sleeve of his jacket. "Does your ankle still hurt? Or your ribs?"

"I'm fine, Granger." He kept his expression shuttered, his eyes cold and indifferent. Pulling away from her gently, he shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it carelessly onto the back of the chair. "You should be sleeping."

Hermione looked equal parts confused and sad. "I-I was waiting for you."

"You shouldn't wait up for me in the future."

"Oh."

Merlin, he felt like such a fucking prick. But Blaise had hit the nail on the head earlier; Draco was terrified that when Hermione recalled the past, she'd no longer look at him the same way she did now, because there were just so many better people had been in her life before. Even saint Potter and that fucking Weasel.

Blaise was right, he was terrified and he was already in too deep not to be scared shitless that she was going to leave someday, that she would move on and

he'd be stuck in this shithole for all eternity. The least he could do was to save her before she spiralled down the same destructive path that he was lying at the bottom of.

"Draco?" Her voice drew him out abruptly from his thoughts and he glanced over at her warily. She was sitting on the bed staring up at him with sad brown eyes. "Did I...did I do something wrong?"

"No," he returned bluntly. Settling down on the armchair, he grabbed the phial of sleeping draught and handed it to her. "Go to sleep."

Hermoine sighed, but she ignored the sleeping draught as she crawled under the covers. Her hand automatically

reached for his, but when she realised that his arms were firmly folded on his lap, she recoiled and laid her hand back down on the bed.

She drew in a deep, shuddering breath and stared up at him. "W-will you stay?"
"Sleep, Granger."

Reluctantly, she closed her eyes and pretended to go to sleep. Hardly ten minutes later, he got up, picked up his jacket and left the room.

Draco fiddled with his wand impatiently as he waited beside the Dark Lord the following afternoon. All the Death-Eaters were already present, but they

were waiting as the prisoners that had been freed from Azkaban two days ago slowly trickled into the Malfoy Manor. Only the purebloods were admitted, while those who were half-bloods or belonged to Muggle families were promptly carried off and incarcerated in the other bases. It had been more than five minutes now, but the prisoners were still entering in straggles.

"They're late," hissed Yaxley, who sat two spots away from the other side of the Dark Lord, right after Dolohov and MacNair.

"It hasn't escaped my notice, Yaxley," the Dark Lord returned with faint irritation. Draco deliberately let out a short bark of laughter, to which Yaxley flushed and

subsided. "My lord," Draco said calmly, "I suggest we close the doors. It's obvious to see that some of the prisoners are ungrateful swines who couldn't care less about loyalty. We don't need them fighting our cause. Let them burn in the crossfire."

The Dark Lord nodded in agreement, before gesturing to Theo, who stood behind him with Greyback. "Shut the doors, young Nott."

"Yes, my lord."

Theo waved a quick hand at the doors and they slammed shut. The sudden noise startled most of the prisoners, who had been chattering amongst themselves, completely disregarding the presence of the lethal Death-Eaters. Everyone turned

to the Dark Lord, who lips curled in a faint, grotesque smile.

"Welcome," the Dark Lord began, with a general nod in their direction. "I'm sure you've all heard of me."

All of them nodded. Some looked deathly terrified, while others squirmed with unease. The occasional few still seemed disoriented after their stint in Azkaban, their eyes wide and almost delirious.

"I see you've met some of my Death-Eaters who helped you escaped two days ago," the Dark Lord gestured to the two on his left - Draco and Bellatrix. Draco simply smirked lazily at them, while Bellatrix let out a cackle of laughter. "In return, all I'm asking for is

your allegiance to our cause. If you would like to join our circle, you may remain behind. If you leave, of course, I can assure you that your survival will not be for long. This is a war. And if you are not with us, then by definition you are against us."

The room was deathly silent.

After a moment's pause, the Dark Lord turned to the snatchers standing behind him, with Fenrir Greyback leading the group. "Round these people up and bring them to the hall. You know what to do if they don't comply."

"Yes, my lord," Greyback responded promptly.

When the last of the prisoners had been herded out of the room, the Dark Lord

turned to MacNair. "What's next on our agenda?"

The Death-Eater straightened in his seat, and he flipped open his notepad. "The Rebellion, my lord. There are exactly three meeting places and I have them all mapped out. Their headquarters is just several miles from Hogwarts, but in all likelihood, the wards are tight and there will be more people."

"My lord, I can take down the headquarters," Dolohov said quickly. Draco noticed that his eyes were bloodshot. He looked like he hadn't slept in forever, and his appearance was almost weary and haggard. Azkaban definitely hadn't been kind to him. "I will go down tonight, with - "

"Draco," the Dark Lord ignored him and turned to the other side instead. "You will bring your group to take down the headquarters."

Draco couldn't quite keep the satisfied smirk from blooming on his face when he noticed Dolohov's barely concealed aggravation. It was clear that Dolohov had been kicked out of favour ever since imprisonment, and his seat next to the Dark Lord was merely out of formalities.

"My lord," Draco began crisply, aware that all eyes were on him, "I suggest that we take it down all at once. Not just the headquarters; but all three places, in a single night. And if you will allow it, I would like to select new members for

my team."

The Dark Lord nodded. "Take your pick."

Draco immediately turned to Bellatrix. He hated her, but she was one of his safest bets. At least he knew she was never going to stab him in the back, both metaphorically and literally. And she always got the job done, in her sick, twisted way.

"Auntie dearest," he drawled, "care to join my side again?"

Bellatrix grinned. "With pleasure, Draco."

"You and your husband will join me on this mission," Draco said, nodding at Rodolphus Lestrage who sat beside her. He then roved his eyes quickly round the

table, picking out potential candidates, as well as people he knew he could trust. "Crabbe senior, Goyle senior, Scabior, Alecko Carrow, Malcolm Braddock, Maisie Donalds and Blaise Zabini. Ten this time. One more from the previous nine. We should succeed this time round, don't you think?" Draco winked at MacNair, who clearly remembered his previous voiced concerns and was still annoyed that Draco had gotten to pick a team.

MacNair scowled. Bellatrix laughed mockingly at him.

When the meeting was over, and Draco had helped to rearrange the other two groups that would tackle the other meeting places, the Dark Lord sent the

rest of the Death-Eaters out to where the other prisoners were. The Death-Eaters were to pick potential members to join the inner circle, upon MacNair's request. "I can see what you mean about MacNair being not quite so trustworthy, Draco," the Dark Lord said, once the room had cleared out. Only Draco and Bellatrix had stayed behind, and Bellatrix was listening to the exchange with interest. Draco didn't quite mind. Over the years, he had become extremely skilled at Legilimency. If Bellatrix showed the slightest signs of betrayal, he'd detect it immediately. Her fanatic loyalty to the Dark Lord also made it quite implausible that she'd actually be a traitor.

"He is far too insistent about expanding the inner circle," the Dark Lord continued, watching Walden MacNair and the Death-Eaters surrounding him outside suspiciously. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that he has ulterior motives."

"We don't know better. That's why we must always be on our guard," Draco reached into the pocket of his suit and drew out a box. There were six phials inside, each neatly marked with Pansy's nondescript handwriting.

"The following phials contain the memories of Theodore Nott, Graham Pritchard, Guthrie Rhodes, Malcolm Braddock, Maisie Donalds and Pansy Parkinson respectively," Draco started,

deliberately leaving out the fact that the memories were duplicates, and that Pansy had already stored the original ones back at the apartment. "I used Legilimency on them during the mission at Azkaban. You can view them if you like, my lord. They're all trustworthy members, except for Graham Pritchard, who was under the Imperius Curse."

Bellatrix's mouth curled in disgust, while the Dark Lord looked faintly annoyed.

"He was put under the curse by Yaxley, so that's another Death-Eater to look out for. In the meantime, I've lifted the curse and modified Pritchard's memories to make it seem like Yaxley tried to murder him, so that Pritchard will always be on

his guard. I'll be testing out the others the next week, during the mission, while I've picked Braddock, Donalds and Bellatrix again," Draco gestured to his Aunt, "because they're members I can trust."

"Quite a thorough system you have there," the Dark Lord picked up the box, studying the phials inside intently.

"Tedious, but it has to be done. We have dealt with far too many defected Death-Eaters to let our guards down, my lord."

"Yes, we have." The Dark Lord stood up, clasping Draco briefly on the shoulder. Draco tried to fight the chill that threatened to race down his spine.

"You and Bellatrix may take your leave first, while I see to the prisoners."

Draco waited until the Dark Lord had

glided out to the hall before standing and heading towards the nearest exit. To his greatest annoyance, Bellatrix followed. Her hair was in disarray and she smelt of something foul.

"The Dark Lord is very pleased with you, Draco," she said, "even if he wouldn't express it in words."

"I'm highly aware of what the Dark Lord thinks of me, Auntie dearest."

"You have done the family name proud. In fact, you are far better than your worthless parents."

Draco stiffened. "Don't fucking remind me of them," he replied brusquely, brushing her hand away when she placed it on his arm.

"Cissy was a traitor," Bellatrix spat out

his mother's name like it was a nasty taste on the tip of her tongue. "And Lucius - Lucius was weak. The most cowardly, pathetic Death-Eater there ever was."

Fury welled up in Draco until he felt nothing but a calm, silent anger. The deadliest kind.

"But you, you turned out wonderfully," Bellatrix continued, oblivious to the icy expression on his face. "A little rough around the edges and a little bit of a weakling at first, but that was because your parents were so messed up. You're not to blame. Now you've grown up and I sometimes think you have more of my blood in you than either of your parents'."

Draco felt something like hatred and self-loathing lodge itself in his throat. He didn't know whether he wanted to throw up or to shoot a killing curse straight into Bellatrix's heart. Instead, he clenched his jaw and nodded at her shortly.

"Thank Merlin for that."

And then he took two quick steps forward and apparated away.

Hermione was having one of the most tiresome days. Draco had not returned at all except to give her breakfast and a sandwich for lunch, and then Pansy had dropped by at seven in the evening with

dinner. But other than that, the house had been deathly silent and despairingly empty.

She had tried to read, going through the yearbooks again. Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan and Parvati Patil's faces were beginning to seem familiar to her. She remembered spending quite bit of time with them, although she couldn't exactly remember what they had been doing.

Studying, perhaps. Pansy told her that she used to study a lot.

But more than anything, Hermione thought of Draco and what she could've possibly done to upset him. He was a puzzle more intricate and interesting than any of the books she could find in his library. And she spent a lot of time

thinking about how she could get through to him, because he seemed so adamant on closing himself off, especially these past two days.

Then Draco came stumbling into the room at one in the morning. Hermione had almost drifted off to sleep when he entered, shutting the door a little roughly behind him. His jaw was clenched and his silver eyes angry. He completely disregarded her and headed straight for the bathroom.

Hermione quickly sat up. "Draco?"

"Go back to sleep, Granger."

She stubbornly pulled back the covers and slipped off his bed. She was just about to follow him into the bathroom when he slammed the door shut, locking

it behind him. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm fucking fine, just piss off."

She didn't. Instead, she hovered hesitantly in front of the door, listening intently as the shower sounds came on and water splattered against the tub. But then there was a sudden shattering sound, sharp and painful, and she stilled. "Draco?"

He was silent inside.

Feeling a surge of worry pumping adrenaline through her veins, she quickly ran back to the bed, grabbing her wand off the dresser. She then manually flung open the doors of his bookshelves, her eyes scanning the titles of the books before landing on a familiar red-covered one she was just flipping through last

week. It was the Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1, a book she vaguely remembered studying a long time ago. Hermione turned the pages, finally coming across the one spell that she was searching for.

Mouthing the spell under her breath, she did a quick test motion with her wand. And then she hurried back to the bathroom, aiming her wand directly at the lock.

"Alohomora."

The door stayed shut. Hermione gripped her wand firmer and took a deep breath.

"Alohomora."

To her greatest relief and surprise, the lock came undone with a click. She quickly pushed the door open, only to

inhale sharply when she saw the shattered glass on the floor from one of the cups that Draco had presumably hurled against the wall. He now sat against the tub, his shoulders hunched and head buried in his arms. The soles of his feet had been cut by the broken pieces of glass, and tiny spots of blood stained the floor tiles.

Picking her way gingerly through the glass, Hermione crouched slowly beside him. He ignored her when she placed a careful hand on his arm, but she could feel his muscles contract under her touch.

"Draco," her voice was barely a whisper. She reached forward and drew his arms away from his face, forcing him

to meet her gaze. His eyes were glossy, bloodshot in his attempt to keep from completely breaking down. The silver in his irises held nothing but pain beneath and within.

"I'm fucking fine," he repeated, drawing away from her and glancing away. He shifted aside, felt his feet connect heavily with a new shard of glass and couldn't stifle the hiss of pain that instinctively escaped his lips.

"No, you're not," Hermione replied and reached for him once more. She gripped his shoulder firmly before he could move away and drew him close. Her arms curled around his neck and the action put her in an awkward position halfway onto his lap, but she ignored it,

ignored everything but him and pressed her cheek against his forehead, feeling him shiver underneath her grasp.

Draco didn't move. He didn't even speak. And they stayed like this for so long until his harsh breaths evened out, until her legs felt numb and the blood on his feet dried up. She thought he'd almost fallen asleep in her arms when he finally let out a shuddering breath. And when he spoke, his voice was low and raw.

"I'm not like her," he seemed to be speaking to himself more than Hermione, but she strained her ears to listen anyway. "I'm not like her. I'm not like any of them."

Hermione didn't know who they were but she could easily hazard a guess. She

shifted slightly, pressing her lips to his forehead and letting her fingers slide up to sift through his soft blond hair.

"Of course you're not," she murmured against his skin, and wished he knew how she thought the world of him, that even though he belonged to the darkest shadows, he was still the brightest ray of light to her. "You're a good person. Never let anyone tell you otherwise."

12 | repello

1 2

r e p e l l o (m u g g l e t u m)

Repels muggles.

Some time later, Hermione began to feel cold sitting on the floor tiles. She was shivering and Draco quickly got up, hauling her to her feet. They headed back into the bedroom and he drew the covers over her, ignoring her wide-eyed gaze and fell asleep in the armchair, careful to maintain his distance again.

Then morning came and he jolted awake. He casted muffling charms on her to

keep her from awaking as he began to get ready for work. His eyes were tired and he was fucking exhausted, but he couldn't care less. When he was finally done, he lifted the charms and, on impulse, reached down to press his lips briefly against her forehead.

His stomach tightened when he caught a whiff of her scent and he briefly thought about what would happen if he let his sanity slip, if he let his lips gloss hers for a fleeting moment or two. But he shoved those thoughts aside firmly. "Thank you," he whispered against her skin, and pulled back.

He headed out of the room, shutting the door gently behind him and doing up the locking charms. He didn't notice the

brown eyes slowly opening behind him, or the curious, satisfied smile, or the fingers that traced the forehead as she memorised the feel of his lips against her skin.

Hermione couldn't help but feel rather anxious when Blaise knocked on the door at eight that morning. She was only just getting used to Pansy, but Blaise was a different matter altogether. She couldn't remember Blaise much, only knowing that he was one of Draco's friends who sneered at her a lot. But he hadn't actually gone out of his way to interact with her.

Blaise seemed to sense her discomfort when he entered and he quickly offered her a charming smile. "Hey, Hermione. Draco said you hadn't had breakfast so I saved some for you."

Hermione smiled faintly at the mention of Draco's name and thanked Blaise for the plate of chocolate-chip pancakes. "Is Draco still outside?"

"No, he, Theo and Pansy had to go patrolling."

"Patrolling - ?"

"You know, for security purposes. The Dark Lord rules with a firm iron-clad fist, and he makes us Death-Eaters patrol different places everyday in search for any sort of rebellion or muggle-born wizards and witches," Blaise halted

briefly as he caught Hermione's frightened expression. "Not you," he hastily assured her. "You're safe here, I promise."

Hermione bit her lip.

"I promise. Look, you're in the house of three of the most terrifying Death-Eaters and staying in the room of the head Death-Eater. In times like these, I don't think there's anywhere else safer than here."

Her lips curled in a semi-relieved smile and Blaise immediately felt at ease. He felt awkward having to tiptoe around Hermione, who was always known for her quick wits and fired remarks, but Pansy was right. This Hermione had been through a lot.

He watched as Hermione ate silently, self-consciously catching his gaze every now and then. He tried to maintain a pleasant look on his face. Merlin, he couldn't imagine how Draco must be acting around her.

Blaise looked round the room absentmindedly, catching sight of a red book that he used to study back in his first year back at Hogwarts. "What spells have you been studying?" He couldn't help but ask.

Hermione swallowed her mouthful of pancakes and set the fork down. "Alohomora. I used that last night...and - Brackium Emendo. Wingardium Leviosa...but I couldn't do that for long. I-I don't really know much anymore."

Blaise felt something strange pull in him, like the earth's axis had momentarily shifted and wouldn't ever be placed back. He hated when constants were no longer constants. Hermione and her knowledge had always been a constant during his Hogwarts days - as aggravating as it was - but now that knowledge was just all gone.

He glanced back at her and forced a smile onto his face. "It's alright. You'll learn again, and we'll help you. Which area of magic are you most interested in studying?"

Hermione paused and frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not too sure," she said at last, "I think...I'm more confident when - well, when Draco was hurt the other

day, it was easier for me to heal him because...I don't exactly know why. It was just easier."

Blaise began to open the doors of Draco's bookshelves, staring intently at the book titles. "Well, Hermione, you're in luck."

She looked at him. He grinned widely. "Healing magic just happens to be one of my many areas of expertise."

"Do you know what my ultimate goal in this war is?"

Draco barely spared Pansy a glance as they trudged back home with food from the nearby diner. Apparating was, of

course, the easiest choice, but Pansy had insisted on walking. Something about fresh air and exercise - as if they didn't already get all the bloody fresh air and exercise they needed during their daily patrols and missions.

"To kill Fenrir Greyback," Pansy declared, when Draco didn't reply. She eyed him in her peripheral vision but he was calm as ever. "I really do want to kill him - and not with an Avada. I want to plunge a knife into his thick, hairy back and slice his skin off layer by layer, until he is nothing but a quivering mess of blood and guts."

Draco didn't blink.

"Do my violent tendencies scare you?"

"Not at all," he replied calmly.

"Although I think Blaise should keep his eyes wide open at all times."

"Please. I'm not going to hurt my boyfriend."

"I beg to differ. I saw ropes and belts the last time I had the misfortune of entering your room; I think there's a fucking lot of hurt in the sex."

"A good kind of hurt," Pansy insisted.

"Don't tell me you've never tried that before, Draco. Back when the four of us first bought the apartment, and you were still into slags, remember? The walls were thin then and you didn't bother putting muffling charms on your room. You and your slags were pretty damn loud. Well, mostly them. You were surprisingly silent through it all. Didn't

ever get your release, huh?"

Draco threw her a frosty look, but her smirk simply widened.

"I know, I know, your slag-hunting days are long over. What triggered it, by the way? The cute brunette in your room?"

When Draco didn't answer, a teasing laugh slipped from her lips. This was too fucking entertaining. "Don't tell me you've never thought of stripping her bare and wrapping her legs tightly around your waist and pounding into her until she's screaming your name and you're biting on your lip so hard it's almost bleeding and the both of you are nothing but a sweaty tangle of naked limbs and - "

He hit her with a Silencio and quickly

strode off.

Rolling her eyes, Pansy easily reversed the spell and trailed after him, a wicked smile playing on her lips. Seemed like the mention of Hermione Granger could get the best reactions out of Draco Malfoy. Who knew?

Draco paused by the main doorway when he heard voices coming from his room. A calm voice that could only be Blaise's, and a hesitant, feminine one. Hermione.

Draco felt an odd emotion surge through him - not quite jealousy, not quite aggravation - he couldn't determine it. It

just felt like Hermione was slowly getting to know everyone in this house and they didn't seem to share the same fear he had in getting to know her, because they didn't need to.

It was fucking unfair that way. None of them - not even Theo - were danger hazards like he was. None of them were as high-ranking or as close to the Dark Lord as he was. None of them killed as many people as he did, or did as many bad things as he did.

Pansy came up behind him and prodded his back with her bony finger. "What're you standing there for?"

Draco quickly headed in, setting the food down on the kitchen counter. Pansy followed suit, before turning her head

towards Draco's room and grinning.

"Is that Blaise and Hermione talking?"

Draco ignored her, instead heading straight for his room. The door was ajar and he frowned, this time feeling absolutely annoyed. Merlin, was his room not a safe sanctuary anymore? Was everyone just going to barge in and see Hermione as and fucking when they liked?

But he stopped when he saw Blaise sitting on the desk, explaining the concept of Polyjuice potions to Hermione. She was staring up at him with eyes alight with curiosity and intrigue, listening intently to every single word he said.

Pansy came up beside Draco, beaming

when she saw Blaise teaching Hermione. Then she sneaked a glance at Draco, noticed his rigid expression and smirked. "Now, now," she whispered, and he felt a fresh wave of irritation surge through him. "There's no need to get all jealous about Hermione spending time with another guy - "

He hit her with another silencing spell again.

And he was just about to turn on his heels to leave when Hermione spotted the movement by the doorway and scrambled up immediately.

"Draco!"

Draco stilled, reluctantly stepping into the room. Hermione noticed the stormy expression on his face and her smile

wavered, but she swallowed and continued, "Blaise w-was just teaching me about Healing Magic."

Draco didn't answer, but his gaze slowly met Blaise's. Blaise quickly jumped off the desk, heading straight for the doorway. "Talk to you later, Hermione."

Hermione smiled faintly as Pansy and Blaise disappeared, shutting the door behind them. But she was more worried for the silent blond in the room, whose body language was entirely closed off. He was inches from the bed but she sometimes felt like he was miles away.

"Is everything alright - "

"Why was the bloody door open?"

Hermione faltered. "What?"

Draco cast silencing charms and locks

on the room before stepping towards her. "Why was the door bloody opened instead of closed? And why weren't the muffling charms set? For fuck's sake, Granger, it could've been Theo walking in instead of Pansy or me and your cover would've been blown!"

"I - I didn't think it would matter."

He froze. "What?"

"Well - since Blaise and Pansy already know...I - I thought that it'd only be a matter of time before Theo knows too."

"So you want Theo to know?"

"No - but if he happens - "

"Because, fuck, Granger, if you want everyone to know about your existence I can easily arrange that for you. Do you want to go back to the Order too and

fight alongside Potter and Weasel? Because that can be arranged, you can fucking leave! It's just a bloody phone-call away - " he stopped when her face crumpled, tears beginning to well up in her sad brown eyes.

If there was one thing he hated more than himself, it was seeing Hermione Granger cry. It always felt like he'd purposely plunged a knife into her heart and twisted.

"You w-want me to leave?" She was crying in earnest now and she brushed the back of her hands fiercely against her wet cheeks.

He went pale, suddenly realising the implications of his earlier statement and how she'd completely misinterpreted

him. Shit. "No, of course not - "

"You just said - "

"I didn't mean it that way," he insisted firmly, closing the distance between them and wrapping his arms around her easily. She slotted perfectly into his embrace, her body soft against the firm planes of his chest. He reached one hand up to tangle his fingers through her wild brown locks and brushed her tears away with his thumb. "That wasn't what I meant, Granger."

She choked back a sob. "It's...it's not?"

Draco exhaled heavily. Decisions, decisions. He didn't want Hermione to go back to the Order, hell, he never wanted her to go; but it had always been the easiest option.

"You can stay for as long as you like," he said instead, leaving the decision in her hands completely and wondering if she would have the sense to leave when the time came for her to do so.

Hermione nodded against his chest, her bushy hair brushing briefly against his chin. "I want to stay," she whispered almost inaudibly, but he heard it loud and clear anyway.

And couldn't decide whether he felt more relieved or terrified.

"So what's your game plan for the attack on headquarters?" Blaise asked Draco some nights later. He didn't mean to pry,

but Draco had not given any of them a status update.

Blaise couldn't help but notice that Draco seemed rather distracted lately, spending far less time in the room with Hermione and far more time outside going on patrols. He didn't even go out with Theo, who was always a good drinking partner to turn to. Blaise figured that the problem had to do with the brunette witch in Draco's room. He and Pansy had spent far more time with Hermione than Draco had these few days. It almost seemed like Draco was avoiding the girl.

Still, that was something Blaise didn't intend to find out. He was actually more concerned about the ambush attack that

was supposed to happen exactly three days from now. He still hadn't a clue what he was supposed to do, but he knew that Draco probably had it all figured out and was just procrastinating until the last minute to brief them.

Blaise cast another glance at Draco, who was sitting on the counter as he ate the Chinese takeaway Pansy had brought back earlier. There was a blank, indifferent expression on his face and Blaise knew that he obviously hadn't heard the question.

"Draco!"

The blond finally dragged his eyes up to meet Blaise's and frowned. "What?"

Blaise rolled his eyes. "I said, what's your game plan for Friday? Do you

actually have a plan, or are you intending to wing it?" The latter question was completely rhetorical. Draco always had a plan.

"I'll tell you now if you're up for it."

"Oh, you know I'm always up for death-trap missions. Gets my adrenaline pumping all the time." The sarcasm wasn't lost on Draco, whose lips twisted in a brief smirk. Blaise set his food carton down and headed out of the kitchen. "Let me get the other two."

"Alright," Draco watched in amusement as Blaise left, but the gleam in his eye faded when Blaise turned towards the left first, heading straight for Draco's room. Pansy was in there with Hermione, presumably to have dinner

together with her. And Draco felt like a prick for eating outside these days, but keeping his distance from Hermione Granger was fucking important.

A minute later, Blaise came out with Pansy in tow and they carefully shut the door behind them, replacing the locking charms. Then Blaise strode towards Theo's door, completely ignorant to what was going inside that room.

"Two galleons says Theo's gonna scream first," said Pansy, as she leaned on the counter. There was a wicked grin on her face as she watched Blaise undo the locks on Theo's door.

Draco scoffed. "You give your boyfriend too much fucking credit. I say Blaise. Make it five and you're on."

"Deal."

They didn't have to wait long. A moment later, an ear-piercing shriek sounded from Theo's room.

"...what the fuck - THEO!"

It was Blaise.

Draco smirked at Pansy. She might be dating Blaise, but he knew these two lads since they were kids. Theo was hardly fazed by anything, but Blaise was a different matter altogether.

Scowling, Pansy grabbed her purse from the counter and handed over the money to Draco. "My boyfriend's a fucking wimp sometimes, I swear."

"Fucking pansy's more like it."

She jabbed Draco with her elbow at his stupid pun. "Shut it - only I'm allowed to

badmouth him."

Blaise came running back to them; his cheeks flushed a dozen shades of red and a laughably horrified look on his face. "You would not believe what I caught Theo doing!"

Draco rolled his eyes. "See, Zabini, that's why we put locks on our fucking doors."

"It wasn't the usual, it was - "

And then Blaise trailed off as Theo sauntered out of the room, followed by two skimpily dressed girls, with newly acquired sex hair and both looking rather frazzled. Pansy's mouth fell open and Blaise flushed even harder.

Theo, on the other hand, was calm and simply hopped up on the counter next to

Draco. "Exit's that way, ladies," Theo said, pointing to the main door and waving them out dismissively.

The girls both frowned. "Aren't you going to at least show us home?" The one in the black dress asked, folding her arms obstinately across her chest.

Theo appeared to think really hard. "Uh...no," he admitted, before turning to Draco. "Did you save me some dinner?" Wordlessly, Draco handed him the last unopened carton of food and Theo happily grabbed it. "Sweet."

"Not even a beverage?" The other girl looked utterly appalled. "What the fuck kinda asshole pulls this shit on girls?"

"The kind who honestly doesn't give a shit," returned Theo pleasantly and

Draco snorted a laugh. "This isn't a fucking hospitality bureau, ladies. We had our fun - although it was rudely interrupted by my dear friend over there," Theo winked at Blaise, who flushed red all over again, "but we knew what we signed up for. So let's leave it at that and be cordial about it."

"Yeah, well, go fuck yourself next time," the girl spat, while the other one in a black dress reached for the bottle of Firewhisky on the table and flung it at Theo. Only her aim was completely off and the bottle veered slightly to the left instead, smashing right into the door of Draco's room.

Draco thought of the other girl inside the room and saw instantly saw red.

"Nice throw - " Theo began mockingly, but Draco hit him with a Silencio.

He was seething, completely aggravated that they'd probably frightened the hell out of Hermione. He got down from the counter; his actions unhurried and painstakingly slow. In his peripheral vision, he noticed Pansy and Blaise exchanging amused glances. The two girls in front of him looked a little nervous, but otherwise defiant and not at all sorry.

Draco exhaled heavily, before pushing both the sleeves of his jumper up to his elbows, deliberately exposing the Dark Mark on his forearm. The girls paled rapidly, eyes widening in horror. One of them even looked a little faint.

"Are you two going to get the fuck out of here," Draco asked them, in his calmest voice, "or am I going to have to throw you out myself?"

The girls immediately ran out of the house, shutting the front door behind them. Draco turned to head to his room, ignoring the smirks on his friends' faces - Pansy, especially, had a sly, knowing glint in her eye and he didn't want to acknowledge that at all.

"Draco - the plan?" Blaise stopped him before he could disappear into the room. Draco paused by the doorway. "One minute. And you," he pointed at Theo, whose smile abruptly faded. "Clean up this fucking mess."

Theo groaned. "Why me?"

"Because you can't handle one girl, let alone two, but you thought it'd be fucking clever to get in on some ménage à trois action," Draco deadpanned, before going into the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

The three of them outside looked at each other. Then Blaise broke the silence. "Draco's right, Theo. And I'm not referring to your relationships, or lack thereof. I mean the things you were doing inside the room earlier," he added, now looking a little green in the face.

Pansy quirked an eyebrow, hardly able to stop her curiosity. "What kind of things?"

Theo grinned and opened his mouth to explain, but Blaise hastily hit him with a

Silencing charm, before turning to his girlfriend. "You know that thing we seldom do and that other thing we never ever do?"

Her eyes widened and she took a wary step away from Theo, inching closer to Blaise instead. "Oh."

"Yeah. He was doing them all."

13 | episkey

1 3

e p i s k e y

Heals minor injuries.

Draco was surprised to see the smile on Hermione's face when he entered the room. She looked both happy to see him and completely amused by something else altogether. Her eyes were dancing and bright, and he felt the cold expression on his face soften as he watched her.

He cast a muffling charm and stepped towards her. "You heard that?"

A giggle fell from her lips. The book on Herbology that was lying in front of her was completely forgotten; along with the carton of food that Pansy had given her earlier. "Did - did Theo really bring two girls home?"

Draco began to nod, but he stilled suddenly when he registered what she'd just said. Home. Fuck, was Hermione actually getting attached to this place?

"Draco?"

He quickly wrenched himself away from his thoughts and focused on her. "Yeah, he did. And he couldn't get rid of them, that bloody git."

"I know. I-I heard. Got a bit of a shock though," she gestured vaguely at the door. "What was that?"

"Firewhisky. Theo'll clean that up."

There was a silence; it wasn't the most awkward, but nor was it the most comfortable either. Draco didn't know why he didn't leave. But he felt no inclination to either.

After a pause, Hermione pulled her knees up to her chest, her eyes alight with curiosity. "Does Theo always do this? Bring his...girlfriends home, I mean."

"Not girlfriends - slags," Draco corrected. "Yeah, he does. He's been a known womaniser since Hogwarts days."

"Yes, I know. If I remember correctly - you were quite the womaniser too."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. As far as he

had been concerned, his conquests had been more or less kept within the Slytherin dormitories. "Who told you?"

Her smile was almost wicked - not dangerous like Pansy's; but more mischievous, playful, and he felt his eyes drawn to her lips like the Earth's magnetic pull. "Rumours. So...are they true?"

"What?"

"Your - slags," she seemed rather uncomfortable saying that. And it almost seemed too vulgar coming from her lips. Draco couldn't decide whether he liked or loathed it.

"In the past," he acceded. When he had time. When he wasn't stuck being the bloody head Death-Eater. When he didn't

have that much blood on his hands that he felt like he'd taint whoever he fucking touched. "Not so much now."

"Oh. Why?" She seemed genuinely curious, and there was a softness in her irises that made him wonder if she knew he was hiding something.

He shrugged. "No reason," his tone was cavalier. "Do you want me to?" He couldn't help but turn the tables on her, and when she blushed a dozen shades of crimson, he felt rather amused.

"Of course not!"

Her response was far too quick, far too heated for him to ignore. "Why?" When she faltered and averted her gaze, he took a step closer. Something told him that he was placing a foot in dangerous

territories, but he had always liked playing with fire. "Why, Granger?"

"Because - " he could practically hear the gears whirring in her head as she fumbled for a valid response. " - because I live here, that's why! And - and it'd be disrespectful if...if you brought some girl - slag - here while I'm in the same room."

His lips twitched. "I see."

"And - and dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Merlin, he was a prick to enjoy this but her reaction was golden.

"Because no one's supposed to see me."

"Right."

"And...um, well..."

"Granger." He finally decided to put her out of her misery and reached forward to

place a comforting hand on her shoulder. What he didn't expect to feel was the heat of her body through his jumper that she had borrowed, or her soft hair that glossed his hand when she turned to look up at him. "I get it."

He turned to leave, but she quickly grasped him before he could go, her fingers clutching his hand and keeping it on her shoulder. He could feel the indent of her collarbone against his skin, and her nails digging lightly into him as a desperate plea for him to stay.

"Are you - " she faltered, taking a deep breath before continuing. "Will you come back later?"

Fuck.

"Granger - "

"If...if this is about me taking the bed, then I could sleep on the chair," she said quickly, tightening her grip on him when he made to pull away. "Or we could share the bed - "

"It's not about that. I just have work to do." Mentally berating himself, he dragged his hand away and avoided looking at her. "Blaise and Pansy will check up on you."

Without waiting for her reply, he quickly left the room, locking the door behind him. Once outside, he let out a silent sigh, which didn't go unnoticed by Theo, who was hovering nearby with his wand in hand, as he cleaned up the mess outside Draco's door.

"You alright, mate?"

"Fine," he returned shortly and went back into the kitchen, where Pansy and Blaise were sharing a carton of ice-cream.

Theo followed him in, grabbing a spoon and nudging Blaise aside so he could get in on the dessert. Draco ignored them but leaned on the counter all the same, summoning his wand to him. Blaise immediately set his spoon down, while Pansy and Theo waited expectantly.

"Friday's going to be different," Draco began, and reached over to grab several pawn pieces from Blaise's Wizard Chess set. He selected four white pieces and lined them up. "Zabini, you're with me. Your only job here is to use Legilimency on every single member in our team -

apart from Bellatrix, Donalds and Braddock."

Blaise frowned, concern edging onto his face. "But - "

" - I know, we're dealing with trickier Death-Eaters here. Especially Carrow and Rodolphus. But you're the only one careful and skilled enough to cover your tracks. You'll be fine. Just make sure you have enough Fictum phials for that day. Now you two."

Draco separated the two remaining pawns before turning to Pansy and Theo. "Your jobs are the same as mine. We'll be using Legilimency on the Rebellion members. Erase whatever information of the Order you can sift out and bring enough phials to store those memories."

Theo's eyebrows shot up. "That's it? Sounds fucking simple, if you ask me." "It is. It's just fucking tedious, because the both of you will be in separate groups to tackle the two other places where Rebellion members are housed. So apart from having to fight alongside the Death-Eaters, you're going to have to use Legilimency on as many Rebellion members as you can. Also, Parkinson - keep an eye out on Pritchard and make sure to keep him safe. Zabini says he's on our side now, we need him alive. Nott - make sure Yaxley stays in line. Don't you fucking dare kill him," Draco warned, when Theo's eyes began to gleam.

Theo rolled his eyes. It was a war, and

killing was as easy as breathing, but Theo wasn't stupid enough to kill one of the top Death-Eaters without thinking of the consequences. "Fine."

Hermione didn't quite understand what was going on with Draco. All she knew was that he was there and not there simultaneously; close to her but too far to reach. He made sure that she was taken care of - whether it was by him or Pansy or Blaise - but never stayed for long. Their conversations were stunted and reduced to bouts of awkward silences.

When Friday arrived, she watched

Draco silently as he pulled on his jacket and grab his Death-Eater mask. Looking at the mask made her feel uneasy, but it was a lot better when she knew that the person behind it was someone kind. Draco had the posture of calm professionalism that made her realise he was going on yet another mission, and she quickly scrambled to sit up, ignoring the ache in her abdomen and the sinking feeling in her heart.

She latched onto the hem of his jacket before he could leave and he paused, staring at her with wary, guarded eyes. "Please - please be careful," she said, unfiltered concern in her voice.

He nodded and reached for the sleeping draught on the dresser, handing it to her.

"I'll be back before you know it."

She took the phial, deliberately setting it aside. She could practically feel his eyes following her action but Hermione couldn't help it. She couldn't go to sleep without knowing that Draco was safe. Blaise and Pansy had kept their mouths shut about what they did as Death-Eaters, but Hermione had gone through the worst of the war. And if the world outside was anything as bad as what she had to go through - she didn't want to think about what could happen to Draco. Taking a deep breath, she quickly took his hand before he could draw away. His skin was warm and she pressed her lips briefly against the palm of his hand, feeling him go rigid under her touch, his

eyes darkening with an intensity that made her shiver involuntarily. "I'll be waiting," she whispered a promise against his skin before letting him go.

She watched him until he left the room, and kept her ears peeled until all four of them had left the apartment. Once the house was empty, she grabbed the clock that Blaise had given to her and set it down next to the pillow. She heard the tick tick tick of the second hand as she closed her eyes and waited, wondering why each second seemed to last an hour, maybe even longer.

Sometime later, the phial that Hermione wore around her neck began to burn and she sat up. She couldn't quite decide whether she loved or hated the Protean

charm. It was the only connection she had to Draco and she loved that she had that. The encrypted words were always an indicator that whoever sent it was still alive, but it also sent a sinking feeling of dread in her heart because whoever sent it was most likely in trouble.

She could still remember the previous message clearly - RUN. And Draco had returned bruised and battered. With shaking hands, she reached for the phial and held it up.

ALECTO CARROW

The words glowed a furious red in the moonlight and Hermione felt a sudden

surge of memories flood through her mind in the next instant. Feeling bile rise up in her throat, she blindly shoved her way to the bathroom, making it just in time before she emptied the contents of her stomach into the sink. She thought she saw a hint of blood mixed in with the rest of the liquid acid, but she couldn't be sure.

With trembling fingers, she flipped the lever on the tap to clean the sink. And then she sank down to her knees, in the same spot where Draco had been just days before. The tears somehow couldn't come this time and she sat there in the darkness, hugging her knees to her chest and concentrating on the dull, throbbing pain in her stomach because the pain in

her heart and head were far worse.

Draco wasn't at all surprised to see Alecko Carrow's name light up the phials. In fact, he mentally chided himself for not realising sooner. He'd never particularly trusted that bloody woman anyway. It was just as well. She could get caught in the crossfire and now he didn't have to give a shit.

Stuffing the phials back under his shirt, he zipped his jacket close and gripped his wand tighter. His senses were heightened as he scanned his surroundings. The place was deathly quiet and the Rebellion outnumbered the

Death-Eaters three to one.

He kept close to the wall as he made his way down the corridor, pausing when he noticed Maisie duelling a Rebellion member in one of the rooms. She was casting hexes and jinxes, but it just wasn't enough.

Without a moment's hesitation, Draco apparated over and blocked the stinging hex that the Rebellion member shot at Maisie. Before the man or Maisie could react, Draco wordlessly cast a Legilimency on him, watching as the man's face contorted with abject horror as Draco quickly learnt all the secrets about the Rebellion. Nothing Draco hadn't already learnt in the past hour.

"What are you fucking - " the man began

but Draco was quick to silence him.

"Sleep tight."

The green jet of light that shot out from Draco's wand was too quick and lethal to block. And the man collapsed onto the ground, eyes wide open with the emptiness of death.

Maisie looked at Draco in sheer gratitude. "Thank you," she murmured, but Draco knew that she wasn't simply referring to him saving her.

It was more than that. Draco had seen Maisie's memories and knew that the girl had never taken more lives than necessary. The total number of people she'd killed in the past amounted to less than ten, and Draco was adamant on keeping it that way. Some people could

still be saved. Maisie was definitely one of those people.

"It's fine," Draco returned evenly, before striding out of the room. He caught a glimpse of Blaise in the room opposite, duelling a Rebellion member alongside Scabior. No issue there. Blaise could hold his own in a fight and while he wasn't the swiftest at Legilimency, he was fucking careful and covered his tracks brilliantly, far better than Pansy did.

Upon rounding the next corner, Draco found himself waylaid by three Rebellion members. Duelling was second nature to him and he was quick on his feet. But having to use Legilimency instead of the killing curse

proved to be tedious, just as he'd predicted. He'd already finished one of them off when someone apparated over to him.

"Need a little help, Malfoy?"

Crabbe Senior.

Draco clenched his jaw and shook his head. "I'm fine, Crabbe."

The name slipped so swiftly past his lips that, for a moment, it seemed as though Draco had been taken back years ago, to Hogwarts days. When it was him and Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, always Crabbe and Goyle. But now there was no more Crabbe or Goyle, victims to a Fiendfyre and the war respectively, and it was just him. Alone. Shoving that thought firmly out of his

mind, Draco apparated behind the Rebellion member, extracting his memories quickly before hitting him with a killing curse. Two down, one to go.

Only that last one was nifty on his feet and Crabbe Senior was a shit excuse of a Death-Eater.

And the moment Crabbe Senior stumbled, Draco found himself lunging forward to block a hex. The hex caught his face instead and Draco swore as he felt a sharp, searing crack in his nose. "Fuck."

"That's right," the Rebellion member taunted, firing hex after hex at him, all of which Draco deflected easily. "You call yourselves the Death-Eaters and you

can't even kill proper - " his words froze on the tip of his tongue as Draco silently hit him with Legilimency.

Draco smirked. "Only because I was playing with my fucking food," he said evenly, letting the last of the man's memories flood his mind.

And, finally, Draco found exactly what he was looking for.

The man's eyes widened in horror as the same memory flashed in his mind. "What the hell - "

"Now I'm hungry," Draco said simply and sent a killing curse straight into the man's heart. He calmly stepped over the dead man's body before glancing over his shoulder at Crabbe Senior. "You alright?"

"Yeah," the Death-Eater spat out a mouthful of blood before climbing slowly to his feet. "Thanks, Malfoy. Really appreciate you blocking the hex for me. How's your nose?"

It hurt like a bitch but Draco revelled in the pain. "It's fine," he muttered and turned to leave. "Stay alert. I might not be there to fucking save your arse next time round."

But even as the words left Draco's lips, he knew he would, somehow. It was what he'd been doing for the past three years, looking out for them, saving their bloody lives, even if they were never aware of it. Not particularly for them - Draco had always thought that Crabbe and Goyle Senior were incompetent

Death-Eaters - but for their sons.
And for Draco's own guilt that he'd tried
to assuage for years now, but never quite
could.

The bed was empty when Draco
returned.

And the panic that surged through him
was physically crushing. He imagined
the worst-case scenarios in the next
fleeting moments - Hermione found by
the Death-Eaters, Hermione being
captured again, Hermione being killed.
The thoughts drained the oxygen from his
lungs, leaving nothing but vacuum
behind, and he couldn't fucking breathe.

Slamming the door shut, he mindlessly cast silencing and locking charms on the room before scanning the room frantically. "Granger?" He heard how pathetic and frightened he sounded, but he couldn't help it.

Where the fuck was she?

He took several steps forward, pausing when he caught a glimpse of a familiar figure in his peripherals. And suddenly, the air was surging back into his lungs and he stumbled in his haste to reach her, collapsing beside her on the bathroom floor.

"Fuck. Granger," he exhaled in relief when he saw her sleeping, her face calm and peaceful. Her fingers were clasped firmly around the phial, a grip

unrelenting even in her sleep.

He had just moved to pick her up from the floor when he hesitated and whipped out his wand instead. Using the Levitation charm, he carefully manoeuvred her back to the bed, tugging the sheets around her. His fingers absentmindedly brushed the stray strands of hair away from her forehead. He wished, for a moment, that he was not Draco Malfoy and she was not Hermione Granger and that there was no war - and maybe things would be a lot simpler then.

"Draco?"

He quickly leaned back when she slowly awoke, her eyelashes fluttering as she opened her eyes, smiling in relief when

she saw him. Then a look of concern flitted across her face and she reached up to slide her palm up against his cheek.

"You're bleeding," she whispered, struggling to sit up. Her breath was hot on his skin and he resisted the urge to lean into her touch.

Draco drew his sleeve swiftly across his nose, ignoring the sharp, stinging pain he felt thanks to the hex he'd taken for Crabbe Senior earlier on. "I'm fine, Granger."

"No, you're not." She reached for her wand on the dresser and pointed it at him. The look on her face was steeled with equal parts worry and determination as she took a deep breath.

"Episkey."

Immediately, he felt the broken bones in his nose slot themselves back into place. He couldn't help but flinch instinctively, but she held him firmly in place, brushing the pad of her thumb against his skin softly.

"Better now?"

He nodded mutely. There was something entirely different about Hermione in situations like this, but he couldn't quite place a finger on why he found it so mesmerising. Her eyes were bright and set with purpose; like nothing else mattered except for him to get better.

She looked...alive.

It seemed the only fitting way to describe her. She looked alive in a time

where death was rampant and the grim reaper's shadow could pass by any moment. She was alive in the city of the dead; not physically dead but dead because of the war; and she was the only beacon of light that was still flickering and he was terrified that, with him, she'd be extinguished eventually.

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p e t r i f i c u s t o t a l u s

Paralyses.

The previous night had clearly taken a toll on all of them, as Draco soon found out the next morning when he left the bedroom. Theo was sprawled on the sofa, still wearing the clothes he had worn the night before and emitting soft snores as he continued sleeping on, dead to the rest of the world. Blaise and Pansy were nursing steaming mugs of coffee by the counter, speaking in hushed

whispers. Blaise had several bruises and cuts on his face, while Pansy had dark bags beneath her eyes.

"Morning, mate," Blaise somehow still managed to look cheery as Draco approached the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee with his wand and sliding it over the counter to Draco. "You alright?"

Draco stared blankly back at him. "What?"

"Your nose. When you came back last night, it was bleeding pretty badly."

"It's fine," Draco returned shortly. Hermione had done a good job with it, and he'd stared into the mirror earlier that morning and saw no signs that it had been cracked just several hours before. Blaise studied his face for a brief

moment before his lips curled in a grin.
"Of course it's fine."

Something in his tone made Draco glanced up quickly, his eyes narrowing. Casting a surreptitious muffling charm on Theo in the living room, Draco turned back to Blaise, remembering how easily Hermione had murmured the incantation to heal his broken nose. "You taught her that?"

"She's a fast learner."

Pansy snorted a laugh and nudged Blaise playfully. "Don't put ideas in Draco's head, baby. Healing spells are fine, but Draco's clearly thinking of something else that she would learn quickly."

Actually, Draco wasn't thinking of anything along those lines, but now that

Pansy had put it into his head, it was all he could think about. Bloody Parkinson. He ignored her and chugged his coffee, enjoying the way the hot liquid scalded his tongue.

Once he'd finished his coffee, he set his cup down and glanced at Blaise, keeping his eyes averted from Pansy's wicked smile. "The message you sent yesterday on the phial. Alecto Carrow? What did you see?"

Blaise quickly straightened, bracing his arms on the counter as the expression on his face grew serious. "I actually didn't see anything using Legilimency." Draco's eyebrows knitted and Blaise hastened to explain himself. "I used that incantation you came up with to check if she was a

skilled Occlumens - and apparently she isn't. But she does have locks placed on her memory, the same kind you place on us. I didn't dare to undo them because I knew it'd trigger an alarm to whoever put them there."

"And so you think Carrow's hiding something."

"It's not much," Blaise continued, sounding somewhat apologetic. "But the rest of the members in the group yesterday are cleared, except for her. She's our safest bet."

"It's like searching for a needle in a haystack," Pansy looked somewhat overwhelmed all of a sudden. "We don't even know exactly what we're searching for."

"It's better than nothing," Draco said calmly. "At least I know who I'm going to bring on the next mission."

Both Blaise and Pansy exchanged confused glances before Pansy looked over at Draco. "Who?"

"Amycus Carrow."

Hermione knew that something was wrong the moment she jolted awake sometime in the afternoon. The discomfort she had felt in her stomach the night before was about a hundred times worse. She threw the blanket off her, stumbling into the bathroom just in time before she began retching.

And if she had imagined seeing blood the night before, she knew she wasn't imagining anything this time round. The sink was immediately stained crimson with blood, and she coughed several more times, feeling her throat burn and tears sting the back of her eyelids.

Draco.

Even in her haze, his was the first face that came to mind. Like always, he was her lifeline and she wished he was there so she could just reach out and hold on.

"Draco," she whispered weakly, her half-dazed mind wondering if he could hear her, wherever he was. And, if he couldn't hear her, then there was -
- the phial. Of course.

She forced herself to grab the towel

from the sink counter, pressing it tightly against her mouth before stumbling out of the bathroom. Sinking onto the floor, she reached up to the dresser to locate her wand. And after some rummaging through the drawers, she found the incantation he'd written on a slip of paper. She could still recall Draco's words to her:

Tap the phial three times before saying that incantation. Other phials like it will heat up and help will come.

Hermione didn't know how it worked, but it was worth a shot. She tried to stifle another bout of coughing fit into the towel, watching with a rising panic as blood seeped into the cotton fabric. With trembling fingers, she pulled the chain

off her neck and pointed the tip of her wand at the phial.

But her eyes were blurry and her words weak, and so she couldn't tell if the incantation worked. And just before her eyes fell shut, she caught a glimpse of two familiar-looking phials sitting on the table above her and felt a sinking feeling of dread.

Draco had forgotten to bring his phials.

Theo was having a shitty day, what with fighting the Rebellion the night before and having the afternoon patrol shift down Diagon Alley. He was exhausted and could think of nothing other than

going back home to catch up on his sleep. Thankfully, his shift was with Malcolm Braddock, and not some other prick he couldn't fucking stand.

When they entered the Leaky Cauldron, everyone glanced up and the place fell painfully silent, the kind only present in front of Death-Eaters. Theo could practically feel them staring at the mark on his forearm, but he ignored their pointed gazes and strode straight over to the bartender. Tom, the old man who used to own the Leaky Cauldron, no longer worked there - rumour had it that he was killed sometime during the war; and the place was now owned by some woman whose name Theo never bothered to learn.

Rapping sharply against the counter, he nodded at the woman and raised two fingers. "Firewhisky."

"You planning on getting drunk, mate?" Malcolm asked, sauntering over to lean against the counter beside Theo.

"One's for you," Theo returned calmly. "We'll do the rest of our rounds later. Drink's on me."

"Thanks."

Theo was just about to reply, but he was promptly distracted when he noticed three girls casting flirtatious glances his way in his peripheral vision. He recalled how Draco had chided him for bringing two girls home. Imagine how Draco would react if he brought three girls home. The mere thought of that

made him smirk and he glanced briefly at the girls.

"You'd think they'd run when they see this, but it just draws them closer," came Malcolm's amused observation, gesturing to the marks on their arms.

Theo couldn't agree more. When the war first began, people were terrified of the Death-Eaters. Most of them still were, but there were always some who got drawn to danger the way moths were to a beacon of light.

"I'm not complaining," Theo chuckled.

"These girls usually make good shags."

"I'm with you on that."

"You know - " and then Theo paused as he suddenly felt the phial hanging on the chain around his neck begin to burn. He

stood up abruptly, pushing his mug of Firewhisky aside.

"You alright, mate?"

"Yeah, fine," Theo waved Malcolm's concerns off. "I have to check on something, just give me a minute." He quickly headed out of the inn, ducking into the nearest dark alcove. Once he was certain that he was hidden and no one was nearby, he drew out the phial.

There was nothing but an address and his eyes widened as he realised that it was the address of the apartment. Shoving the phial back under his shirt and zipping up his jacket, he strode back into the Leaky Cauldron.

"Listen, mate, I've got a bit of an emergency to see to," he told Malcolm,

who was staring at him in confusion.
"You'll be alright on your own?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." Theo slid a couple of galleons across the counter to cover both their drinks and left the Leaky Cauldron. Disappearing once again into the dark alcove, he apparated back home.

The house was silent as usual when he arrived and Theo paused in confusion. He'd been expecting to see any of the other three, but the place was completely empty. Shrugging out of his jacket, he took out his phial and stared at it. The words were fainter now but still glowing dimly - and he was right, he hadn't read it wrongly.

"Draco?" He called, chucking his jacket

on the sofa and striding towards the kitchen. There was no one, so he checked the rooms one by one. "Blaise? Pansy?" But one glance around their rooms and he knew that there was nobody, until he paused in front of Draco's door and hesitated.

"Draco, mate?" He rapped sharply on the door, knitting his eyebrows thoughtfully. Draco was supposed to be at a meeting with the Dark Lord and some other Death-Eaters. He wasn't supposed to be at home. "Draco."

There was nothing but silence.

Theo decided to just fuck it. Whipping out his wand, he swiftly undid the locks on Draco's door and pushed it wide open. Only to freeze in horror when he

saw a brown haired girl sprawled on the floor, lying in a pool of crimson blood.

The air was different when Draco returned home later that evening. Theo was pacing rapidly in the living room, running a shaky hand through his hair over and over again; making his dark locks stick out in every different direction.

When he spotted Draco hovering by the doorway, his mouth fell open and he walked over to him rapidly. "Mate, where the hell have you been? Hermione almost died today - " Theo trailed off when he saw the look of sheer terror on

Draco's face, and he fell a step back, suddenly feeling unsettled by this version of Draco. "You alright?"

"Where is she?" Draco's voice was strangled and Theo didn't think he'd ever heard his friend sound this unravelled before.

"In the bedroom - "

Draco pushed past him blindly, rushing straight into his room, only to pause when he saw Pansy sitting by Hermione's bed, whispering incantations under her breath as she pressed the tip of her wand to Hermione's chest. He didn't think Hermione had ever seemed more fragile, except maybe that first night he found her.

"How is she?" Somewhere in his

subconscious, Draco realised that he sounded frightened, terrified like a little boy, but he honestly couldn't give a fuck. He couldn't even breathe, the air felt like it was charged with toxin. "Is she - "

"She's alright," Pansy replied softly, never once taking her eyes off Hermione as she continued to soothe the inflammation in the girl's lungs. "But we're waiting for Blaise - he knows these things better than I do."

It was all Draco could do not to rush over, wrap his arms around Hermione and apparate them to St. Mungo's there and then. He wanted to, it was killing him just to stand there so bloody helplessly, but common sense told him that Hermione couldn't be seen in a

public hospital.

So he stood there silently, his jaw clenched and trying not to show that he was fucking afraid. Because he was. He really and truly was, and he had never been more afraid before. He couldn't lose Hermione Granger after searching finding her, not now and perhaps not ever.

"The potion's done," Blaise pushed his way into the room, carrying a small bowl of steaming brown liquid and setting it down on the bedside drawer. Then he stood up and glanced over at Draco, who had a rigid, tight expression on his face. "Give this to her when she wakes up. One bowl every six hours. She's going to be fine."

All at once, the air felt more breathable. "What - " Draco cleared his throat and tried to erase remnant traces of panic in his voice. "What happened to her?"

"Internal injury," Blaise replied promptly. "I think she's had it for awhile now, but she just didn't realise it - either that or she's been ignoring it." Draco felt something in his gut twist painfully at that. "She'll be fine, Draco, this potion works wonders."

He didn't answer. Because the guilt was kicking in and it was physically painful, like someone had shot multiple Crucios at him. He felt Blaise's hand on his shoulder and he tensed.

"We'll be outside if you need us," Blaise said gently, and left the room with Pansy,

Theo following after hesitating by the doorway for a moment. And then the door closed behind them with a click and it was just Draco and Hermione, just him and her, the way it should've always been.

Outside, Theo watched silently as Blaise began to Scourgify the rest of the apartment, removing the remnant bloodstains left on the floor. Hermione's blood. Somehow, the thought of that made Theo feel rather sick, which was just ridiculous, because he'd seen so much blood before that it shouldn't have bothered him.

"Okay - " he began at last, when he finally couldn't stand the tensed silence for one more second. " - is no one else wondering why we've got a bloody fugitive in our apartment?"

Pansy paused in the middle of arranging the phials and glanced over at him with a frown. "She's not a fugitive."

"She's not on the side of the Dark Lord, and she used to be a part of the Order back when the Order still existed, so she is a bloody fugitive. I can't believe you two are still so calm about it when..."

Realisation suddenly dawned on him and he scowled. "You two fucking knew about her and you didn't tell me?"

For Merlin's sake. He was beginning to lose his touch. He was supposed to be

eagle-eyed, sharp and shrewd. An actual person hiding in the apartment wasn't supposed to escape his notice.

"We both found out by accident," Blaise explained, "well, it was an accident for me, at least. Pansy sniffed her out during the full moon."

"She smelled of blood back then. Mostly soap - but a very, very faint trace of blood, and I thought I was imagining things." Pansy let out a sad sigh, before shaking her head in disbelief. "I can't believe I didn't see it coming."

Blaise stood up and went over to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Not your fault, baby. Even Draco didn't notice anything."

"Why would Draco notice anything?"

Theo rolled his eyes. "It's Hermione Granger. We should be bloody thankful that Draco's not parading around waving a sign that says 'fuck you, mudblood' - "

"Er, Theo - "

" - because, let's face it, Draco can't stand her. This'll be interesting. I mean, he can't even stand breathing the same air as her. Do you remember back then in Hogwarts, Draco was so - "

"Theo - "

Theo paused, staring at Blaise and Pansy in exasperation. "What?"

The two of them exchanged looks uneasily, before Blaise broke the silence with an awkward laugh. "You or me, baby," he told Pansy, who sighed and disentangled herself from his embrace,

taking several steps towards Theo.

"Actually," Pansy started, rather delicately, "Draco doesn't hate Hermione."

Theo rolled his eyes again. "Of course he doesn't, because that's an understatement. He loathes her - were you not there at Hogwarts? She's the fucking bane of his existence, I mean apart from Potter and the Weasel, but - " Pansy hit him with a silencing charm. He scowled, removing the silencing charm with a quick wave of his hand. For Merlin's sake, was no one going to let him finish a bloody sentence?

"Shut up and listen for a second," Pansy insisted, when he opened his mouth to speak again. She sat down opposite him

on the edge of the coffee table. Her eyes were bright and dancing, and Theo couldn't be sure if he ever saw that look in her eyes before. "Draco doesn't hate Hermione," she repeated, slowly, measuredly, like she was trying to drill the words into his thick head. "Didn't you see how worried he was earlier? Or the fact that Hermione was in his bedroom?"

Theo's eyebrows shot up. "They're - "

"No, they're not," Pansy immediately shot that idea down. She'd spent many an afternoon with Hermione - and while it mostly involved relating stories about her days in Hogwarts to Hermione, who seemed utterly enthralled to hear them; she knew for a fact that there wasn't

much of a progress when it came to the relationship between Draco and Hermione. "They're, well - "

And then she trailed off, because what were they, really?

They weren't as set and defined as she and Blaise were. She and Blaise were perfectly aware of their feelings for each other. And they were together in a time like this because they had a common goal - to end the war. They loved fast and strong, like a hurricane that could weather any storm, all storms, because they never knew which day would be their last.

"Promise me," she remembered Blaise saying once to her, when they were basking in the afterglow of sex and he

was freckling soft, slow open-mouthed kisses down her collarbone, "that if I die - "

"Why would you die?" She remembered the catch in her voice, the slow tremor of her heart like the beginnings of a massive earthquake from within.

"I'm saying if," he smiled and reached up to press a brief, chaste kiss to her lips. "If I die, just promise me you will still keep fighting."

Her thoughts cleared and she smiled back at him. "Of course. And if I die - you must promise to keep fighting too, until the war ends."

Pansy knew for a fact that if either of them died, the other would mourn for awhile, but still carry on. For them, there

was no time for sadness, no time to fear. There was just the here and the now, and they captured every moment and tried to make it better than its predecessor. No regrets.

It was glaringly different for Draco and Hermione. Pansy thought she could see a glimpse of painful co-dependence between the two, the kind that made her shiver, the kind where one was alive only because the other one was. It was - well, it was beautiful and fascinating but so dreadfully lethal and toxic in a time like this.

She glanced over at Blaise when she couldn't think of an answer to give to Theo and he shrugged. Finally, she settled on the vaguest sort of answer she

could come up with, "they may have feelings for each other."

But it was sufficient for Theo's mouth to fall open in surprise. "What - " he shut his mouth abruptly with a visible effort, and then there was a pause. Pansy could almost see him trying to internalise the revelation. It was going to be tough for Theo to actually come to terms with it, seeing as he neither believed in romance or love.

"The Slytherin arse and the Gryffindor princess?" He shook his head in disbelief, letting out an awkward laugh at last. "That'll be the fucking day."

Hermione wasn't awake.

She still wasn't awake and Draco couldn't stop himself from pacing the room rapidly, his breaths erratic like sharp, painful stabs leaving puncture wounds in his lungs. He didn't think he had ever felt this...lost, like the world's axis had vanished and it was spiralling out of control.

Everything felt unravelled, he felt unravelled, and nothing made sense.

Then a sudden rustling sound made him pause, glancing over at Hermione wildly. She was slowly stirring awake, her lashes fluttering and her hand pushing the covers aside.

"Granger."

He immediately rushed to her side,

pushing aside the covers for her. His hands gripped her shoulders tightly, as though he was terrified of her leaving him, and he knew his grip was vice-like but he couldn't help it.

He leaned over her, his figure dark against the iridescent moonlight bathing the room. "Fuck, Granger - how do you feel?"

A slow, soft smile curved on her lips and she stared up at him with a look that made his heartbeat kick painfully. She reached up to slide one of her palms against his cheeks and drew her thumb briefly against his skin.

"I'm okay."

The relief he felt was just as crushing as the guilt was, just as physically

exhausting, and he let out a haggard sigh, dropping his forehead against hers and shutting his eyes. And because everything had unravelled and nothing made sense -

- he thought it was okay to let his lips meet hers.

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Summons from a distance.

Hermione could barely breathe. She didn't dare to. She held her breath because it was too precious a moment to break.

The pressure of his lips on hers were light, almost cautious, which she found fitting in a time like this. Her chest tightened and her head spun with

something like the heady realisation that Draco Malfoy was kissing her, actually kissing her, because it often felt like he was far too distant from her and this, this was perfect.

And so she kissed him back, moving her lips tentatively against his. Just lips against lips, no tongue, no teeth; simple as ever. His scent invaded her senses like the best kind of aphrodisiac there ever was, and she breathed him in, sliding her fingers gently up his arm to draw him closer. Because that was all she ever wanted, really. Just him - closer.

But then Draco froze under her touch, and it was all over.

He drew away quickly, his eyes almost

obsidian as he glanced away and the expression on his face an unusual shade of indifference.

Hermione watched him warily. "Draco?" "You should get some rest," he replied calmly, taking the bowl from the dresser and handing it to her. He was silent as she drank all of it and when she was done, he gently eased her back down onto the bed, drawing the covers back over her.

But he didn't leave, not this time. And, after a moment's hesitation, he pulled the leather chair over to her bedside and settled down in it. His hand found hers under the blanket and he held on tight. It was funny, because she'd always treated him like he was her lifeline and

somehow his grip seemed to suggest otherwise.

"Sleep, Granger."

Hermione couldn't help but let a tiny, satisfied smile curve on her lips. Because he was right next to her, where she'd always wanted him to be, and that was all that mattered.

"Goodnight, Draco."

Draco was more than surprised to find that none of his flatmates were in their respective rooms the next morning. Pansy was sprawled on the sofa, while

Theo slept in a huddle on the floor. Only Blaise was awake, even though it was only six in the morning.

"Morning," Blaise was brewing a fresh pot of coffee and he didn't even turn as Draco entered the kitchen.

Draco frowned as he noticed the tired bruises under Blaise's eyes. "Did you even sleep at all?"

"No. I was up all night brewing these," Blaise gestured briefly to the phials on the counter, each arranged according to their medicinal purpose. "Have Hermione drink these after breakfast. There's more in the cupboard for the next few days. How is she?"

"I don't fucking know," Draco answered truthfully. He was still reeling from the

previous day's events and his usual rational approach to things somehow didn't seem to work when it came to Hermione. He glanced over at Theo and Pansy in the living room and his frown deepened. "They didn't sleep much either?"

"Not until three for Theo, and Pansy only fell asleep about an hour ago. We were worried, mate," Blaise added, when Draco shot him a confused look. "You don't know how scared we were when we came back and saw bloodstains all over the place."

Draco went white. "What?"

"Theo saw the worst of it. Hermione used the Protean charm to call for help and he was the first one back. He gave

her some blood-replenishing potion because she'd already lost a lot of blood. If he'd been any later, Hermione would've been a lot worse. Pansy and I only came back about a half hour later and by then, the apartment had all kinds of bloodstains all over because Theo had been running around trying to find the bloody potion. You should've seen your room. There was blood everywhere."

The words hit Draco like a ton of bricks. He felt sick to his stomach and he hated himself for not being more fucking careful. He'd found Hermione, for fuck's sake, and it was the least he could do to look after her when she hadn't anyone else.

"I fucking forgot the phials," Draco's voice was strangled, weak, but he could hardly care less. His fists were clenched and his nails dug hard into his skin and he swore he could almost feel his skin slice open and bleed. But they didn't - they should have - and he felt like a complete prick for forgetting the one connection he had to Hermione.

Blaise seemed to sense Draco's mood and hastily placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault. Pansy was blaming herself earlier but it wasn't her fault either. None of us knew, not even Hermione."

Draco didn't feel any better. How could he, when he was the one person who was never supposed to fail Hermione

ever since he found her? But he did anyway, in his usual fumbling way, and she still looked at him like he hung the fucking moon. He wasn't blind to any of that.

"Are you going in to work today?" Blaise's voice interrupted his thoughts, and Draco shook his head. Blaise smirked knowingly. "Thought so. I'll cover for you; don't worry about it. Just make sure Hermione gets better."

Draco mentally swore on Salazar's soul that he would. The other three soon left for work, despite being utterly drained from the previous day. But it was an unspoken agreement between the four of them for as long as they had been living in the apartment together - they could

never skip work together. It was far too great a risk at a time like this.

Draco returned to the room sometime later with breakfast and a tray of healing potions, just in time to see Hermione stirring awake. He quickly set the food and medicine down with a wave of his hand, before striding towards the bed and gently helping her to sit up.

When she was leaning comfortably against the pillows propped up behind her, he finally dared to meet her frank gaze. "How're you feeling, Granger?"

A soft smile glossed her lips. "I'm alright."

He tried to pretend like her answer and her smile didn't affect him, but it did. It really did. A part of him was terrified

that he was finally caving in and being by her side even though he wasn't supposed to, but another part of him revelled in the closeness again, because, well, he fucking missed her. She was like the brightest of suns on the coldest of winter days and he couldn't help but soak her in.

So even when she finished her breakfast and the potions, he found himself unable to leave when he should have. She lay curled up on the bed and he lounged in the chair and the air eased between them and it was the way it was all over again. "About Theo..." she began, when all was quiet between them. He raised his eyebrows and she shrugged. "I - I don't know if I was hallucinating yesterday

but...I think I saw him. Did I?"

Draco nodded slowly. "He was the first to find you. Probably saved your life by giving you the blood-replenishing potion."

Hermione's eyes grew wide with awe. And after a moment's pause, she smiled. "Can I - can I talk to him when he gets back?"

"You want to talk to Theo?"

"To thank him," she turned on her side and took Draco's hand, pressing it beneath her cheek. And she kept it there even as her eyes began to fall shut. "Does this mean that I-I no longer have to stay in hiding...since everyone knows about me?"

Draco hadn't even thought much about

this, but now that she'd brought it up, he realised that she was right. There was no need for Hermione to stay hidden, she was no longer his secret, she was theirs. And he didn't know what sort of changes this could bring about.

Theo was seldom ever nervous, because being a nervous Death-Eater was just plain stupid and ridiculous, but this was one of the rare few times. He leaned against the counter, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for Blaise and Pansy to leave Draco's room.

He'd just learnt earlier that evening that Hermione Granger wanted to talk to him. Which was about fucking time, because he was the last to know about her, but then Blaise had to scare him off with talk about how Hermione was different from the old tenacious, feisty, idiotic Gryffindor she used to be.

For Merlin's sake. How different could she possibly be?

Then again, it was a war and Theo wasn't blind to the kind of changes the war had inflicted on the people in his life.

"Theo," Pansy's voice made him look up. She was beckoning him over as she and Blaise stepped out of the room, looking marginally more relieved than they had

been before they entered. Probably because Hermione was now feeling better.

Theo pushed himself off the counter and sauntered over towards them, only for Pansy to jab him nastily with the sharp point of her elbow. "Ow, what the fuck?" "Be nice," came her warning hiss. Blaise was chuckling in amusement beside her. And Theo wondered for the millionth time how the four of them had managed to live in the same apartment together for so long.

He scowled, pushed past her and went into the room. He stopped short once he was properly inside. The mental image of Hermione sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood was vivid, and he

swallowed hard. Blood was fine, blood was just blood, but it was different when the blood belonged to someone whose name he actually knew.

"Shut the door behind you."

Draco's voice dragged him out of the memory, and Theo hastily kicked the door shut behind him, lifting his gaze to meet Hermione's. She was sitting at the edge of the bed, gazing at him with curious brown eyes. Her hand was slotted within Draco's grasp and he sat next to her, an unusually placid look on his face.

Theo didn't think he'd ever seen Draco looking so at ease before.

"Granger, you remember Theodore Nott," Draco said to the girl beside him.

"Fellow Slytherin and, by extension, one of your greatest enemies during Hogwarts days."

Hermione's lips quirked in a brief smile, but Theo noticed that it was a shy sort of smile, hardly like the confident, self-assured one he remembered back at Hogwarts which, by the way, was never directed at him. Mostly because he was a prick back then, but still.

"Yes - yes, I think I remember." A tiny frown surfaced on Hermione's forehead, before it quickly cleared and she gazed up at him questioningly. "Were you one of the boys who...made fun of me in Potions class?"

"Yes," Theo was surprised that she still remembered. He let out a rather self-

conscious laugh. "Sorry 'bout that."

"It's okay. It's all in the past now."

And then there was awkward pause, the kind Theo thoroughly hated. So he quickly wracked his brains to come up with something to fill the silence.

"If it helps, the other boy who made fun of you in that class was Draco," was all he could come up with.

But it was good enough, and Theo felt the tension dissipate when Hermione's smile widened, even as Draco threw a frosty look his way. "Yes, I - I remember that too. Thank you, by the way," she added, as an afterthought, "for saving my life last night."

Theo immediately felt uncomfortable. He didn't think he would ever forget the

panic he felt the previous night. And he'd kicked himself countless of times for only being able to find a stupid blood-replenishing potion for her, when he could've done so much more if he actually knew where Blaise stored the rest of the damn healing potions or what labels they went by.

"Oh, that," he quickly brushed it off with a nonchalant laugh. "Yeah, it's nothing - least I could do. So how long have you been staying here?"

Hermione glanced unsurely at Draco before frowning. "Over a month, I think." She tugged hesitantly at the hem of her jumper, which Theo belatedly realised looked completely oversized on her. Because it wasn't hers, it was obviously

Draco's.

Merlin, was Pansy actually right about them?

Theo grinned. "Over a month, huh? So listen, if you're tired of wearing Draco's clothes all the time, I've got some clothes from a couple of girls who spent the night; you can have them if you want."

"Oh," and then Hermione's eyes danced and they seemed far more wicked than Pansy's ever were. "Like those two girls you brought home together the other day?"

Draco smirked amidst her amused giggles, and Theo thought that life had suddenly gotten a lot more interesting with Hermione Granger thrown into the

mix.

"Draco? Are you awake?"

Of course he was. Draco couldn't remember the last time he ever had a good night's sleep, and his insomnia was heightened now that Hermione was living with him. He figured that he'd sleep better once the war was over, although, if he was being entirely honest with himself, he didn't know if the war would ever end.

Time was in such a state of stasis now.

He glanced over at Hermione, who

seemed equally as awake and alert as he was. She struggled to sit up in bed.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," but the look of hesitation and fear on her face told him otherwise. She bit her lip. "I just - remember that night? When someone lit the phials and there was a name - "

He froze.

" - um, Al - " Hermione sounded like she couldn't breathe and the words seemed physically painful to say out loud.

And suddenly, the pieces fell into place.

"Granger," his voice was urgent, almost desperate, but he could hardly help himself. "Alecto Carrow - was she one of them?"

Slowly, but surely, she nodded. "I didn't

remember...until I saw the phial."

He drew a deep, shuddering breath. He'd been evading the topic for so long because he hadn't wanted to push her, but now seemed like right time to finally, finally ask. "I've been wanting to ask you this for awhile now," he began, trying to stay calm, but it was difficult. "About your - "

" - capture," she finished. Her hand instinctively sought his, which he gave without a moment's hesitation. She smiled faintly, and he found his eyes drawn to the magnetic upward pull of her lips. "I've always wondered why you didn't ask. I thought maybe you had seen the phial of - of memories that Pansy took."

"I haven't," he admitted, even though the thought of that had always been so terribly tempting. "I don't want to use Legilimency on you, Granger. You're not the enemy."

"Neither are you," she reminded him softly, and his breath caught for a moment because she had eased away his insecurities with just three words. She shifted closer to him even though he seemed miles away on his chair.

"I remember - flashes," she started, haltingly. Her voice was small and almost inaudible, but she spoke loud enough only for him to hear. "I don't even remember how I ended up where I did, Draco, I just remember that I was...there, in some empty room. In many empty

rooms. They kept me at different places, and gave me food and water - but just barely enough so that I'd begin to starve, but then they'd be back with more food and water. I spent many days alone - I think that's what I remember most - just...waiting, I guess. They came in every few days and I don't remember most of those parts, but it was painful. They just used the Cruciatus curse on me a lot - "

His hand tightened on hers. He saw red then, he really did, and he wanted nothing more than to find Alecko Carrow at that moment and tear her apart. Not use the Avada on her, no, that was far too simple and too quick a death for her. He now understood how Pansy felt about

Fenrir Greyback because he felt the same. He wanted to rip Alecko fucking Carrow apart limb by limb, until she was nothing but a limbless bloodied body writhing and suffering on the ground and even then it still wouldn't be enough, he would -

"Draco," Hermione's gentle voice pulled him out of his daze and he glanced over at her. Her eyes were filled with concern; concern not for herself but for him.

He cleared the thoughts from his head and got up from the chair. He didn't know who was more surprised - him or her, when he sat down on the bed next to her, leaning against the headboard just as she was, before pulling her into his

arms. "You don't have to continue if you don't want to."

"It's okay," came her quiet reply. "I don't mind telling you what happened. I just...wish I could remember more. I do remember marking the walls though," and she lifted her hand to trace the wall next to the bed, fingers counting off four vertical strokes before finishing it off with a horizontal fifth. "There was this place that had a ratty chipped wall made of...decaying wood, I think. And I used my fingernails to carve the days in. So that I-I could remember something, at least. I also remember how some people sent me food, just days before you found me. I was on the verge of starving, so they saved my life. Their voices kept me

alive most nights. Are they - "

She turned to look up at him, an unspoken question on the tip of her tongue. Draco immediately knew what it was, and he closed his eyes briefly, recalling the look of terror on the little boy's face back at the Quarry.

"Yeah, they are."

"Oh."

Her eyes misted and she pressed her face against his chest, weeping silent tears into his jumper. And she was quiet for a long while after, so long that he knew she wasn't going to say another word about what had happened, at least for the night. So he just held her, because when it came to Hermione Granger, it seemed like that was all he could do

sometimes, while the world outside spun madly on.

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f i d e l i u s

Conceals a secret.

Draco had fallen asleep with Hermione in his arms.

And he didn't realise it, not until the next morning, when the sound of soft knocks on the door slowly awoke him. His sleep was fitful, as usual, with dreams drifting in and out of his subconscious and his mind jolting awake every so often, his senses alert as ever.

Because when it came to a war, you slept with your eyes wide open.

But it was different last night. He felt more rested, somehow, and a part of him wondered if it had anything to do with the witch whose head lay on his chest. He glanced down at her silently. One of her hands lay fisted around the fabric of his jumper; while the other clutched the phial hanging from the chain he'd given to her. Her breaths were steady, peaceful, which seemed almost ludicrous in a time like this.

The persistent knocking on the door drew him out of his reverie and he gently shifted Hermione aside before getting up and going over to answer the door.

Blaise was standing outside, two plates

of waffles in his hands; and Pansy was next to him, holding a tray of healing potions. She managed a half-smirk by way of greeting, but Blaise smiled brightly at him. "Morning, mate. How's Hermione?"

"Still sleeping," Draco replied, casting a brief glance over his shoulder at the brunette on his bed. But Hermione was no longer sleeping; she was slowly beginning to sit up and smiled when she saw Blaise and Pansy standing by the doorway.

"Hello, Hermione," Pansy pushed past Draco quickly, ignoring the low growl in his throat as she did, and headed straight for the girl. It had only been weeks, but Pansy sometimes treated Hermione like

she was her best mate and if he was being entirely honest, this nicer side of Pansy was sure as hell fucking with his mind.

"How're you feeling?" Pansy asked, setting the potions on the bedside drawer and helping Hermione to the edge of the bed. Blaise took that as a cue to enter the room too, pushing past Draco and setting the waffles down on the table.

Draco swore under his breath and shut the door. If he didn't shut the door, he was almost certain even Theo would come barging in sooner or later. His room was beginning to feel like a common meeting place and he didn't quite know how he felt about that.

Hermione, on the other hand, seemed

genuinely pleased to see the other two Death-Eaters. "I-I'm much better now," she said, "thank you."

"So, listen," Blaise began, "if you're feeling better, why don't you come out of the room?"

Draco immediately froze at Blaise's question.

"There's a TV outside, we've got tons of things to do outside, and you can get eat whatever food you can find in the kitchen. I mean, you can't stay in this room forever - "

Hermione's look of discomfort went unnoticed by Blaise, but Draco certainly noticed it and he shot Pansy an irritated glance, which she caught immediately.

"What Blaise meant to say was - we'd

love if you could come out," Pansy hastily interrupted, trying to sound as pleasant as she could. "Maybe have a meal or two with all of us."

"All - all of you?" Hermione echoed, sounding rather faint.

Blaise shrugged. "You've already met all of us, even Theo. I know that Draco's room is a safe haven for you, but you can't stay in here forever."

The pause that followed his words was thick and tense enough to cut with a knife. And Draco quickly decided that Blaise and Pansy had overstayed their welcome, so he opened the door, propping it open with his shoulder. "Don't you two have to get to work?"

Pansy's eyes glinted knowingly at him.

"Don't you?"

"You know I can be as late as I fucking want. I'll meet you three at the Manor."

The definitive tone in his voice was explicitly clear, and Pansy and Blaise swiftly headed out of the room after telling Hermione to take good care of herself. Then it was just the two of them, and Draco turned to her after shutting the door.

"You alright, Granger?"

She smiled weakly. "I'm okay," she said, her voice soft. And, after a pause, continued, "do you think Blaise was right? Do I...do I have to - " she trailed off, sounding so afraid that Draco had to cut in.

"You don't have to do anything you don't

want to, Granger. You can stay in this room if that's what you want."

The curve of her lips deepened and widened, and it was simply beautiful. He wondered for the millionth time how he hadn't ever noticed Hermione Granger's smile before. Probably because he had that massive stick of snobbery and pureblood crap shoved up his fucking arse back during Hogwarts days.

He hadn't any of that anymore and what with both his parents dead, he was finally free to think however he wanted of Granger, and the mere idea of that alone was both liberating and terrifying.

The general meeting with the Dark Lord the next day was both dreary and depressing, but Blaise found himself kept on tenterhooks as he always was whenever he was in the same room as the Dark Lord.

Draco was right by the Dark Lord's side as usual, with that cold, indifferent façade he'd long mastered, looking utterly bored out of his mind. Blaise didn't think anyone else saw the calculative gleam in Draco's eyes as he studied the other Death-Eaters in the room, but Blaise had been friends with Draco for long enough to know that he was thinking.

Draco Malfoy was always thinking.

As for Blaise, he was simply content to pretend like the Dark Lord's words were worth the weight of gold, not too far off from the way the rest of the Death-Eaters treated the Dark Lord - although in their cases they probably did think the world of their leader.

Bloody brainwashed bastards, Blaise couldn't help but think, then firmly shoved the thoughts from his mind. Draco's locks on his mind always held, but Blaise didn't think he could afford the risk of anyone finding out what he truly thought.

A sudden movement from beside him made him freeze, and he cast a surreptitious glance to his side. Graham Pritchard was beside him, a look of

focused attention on his face as he pretended to listen to the conversation in the room, but his posture was stiff.

Graham jerked his head slightly towards the exit, a movement so minuscule that Blaise almost missed it, before mouthing, "later."

Blaise managed an inconspicuous nod. Graham fell a step back.

Across the room, Draco's gaze sharpened and landed on Blaise, which wasn't much of a surprise because Draco never missed anything. His intent was clear - what did Pritchard want?

Blaise didn't know. But he was going to find out. The meeting soon came to an end, with Draco picking the next batch of Death-Eaters on his newest mission.

This time, neither Blaise, Pansy nor Theo were involved, and while Blaise was marginally relieved to not be sent on another death-trap mission, he couldn't help but feel concerned about Draco.

Still, Draco could hold his own. He always had.

Blaise made his way out of the room, careful to avoid his friends - since the four always made sure not to be seen together. Graham was already waiting for him by the doorway, and Blaise paused.

"I'll meet you at Diagon Alley," he murmured swiftly, before leaving Malfoy Manor. Once outside, he apparated to the meeting place and didn't

have to wait long before Graham appeared some distance away from him. Blaise nodded as a brief greeting and headed towards him. "You have something to tell me?"

"Yeah," Graham glanced around suspiciously. The streets were relatively empty; the once crowded Diagon Alley now a deserted place because of the war. But that didn't mean that there weren't enemies lurking round every corner. He cast a quick disillusionment charm on himself, before saying, "I found out something else about Yaxley." Blaise felt mighty foolish because it seemed like he was having a conversation with himself. But this new revelation was too good to pass up.

"What did you find?"

"I was on patrol alone the other day when I saw Yaxley going into the White Wyvern, and he was acting suspiciously," Graham began, keeping his voice low, "so I trailed him in. He went into this private room - you know how the White Wyvern has this meeting rooms that only Death-Eaters can use?"

Blaise nodded. "He went into one of those?"

"Yeah. I think someone was waiting for him in the room, and I heard them talking about an organisation within the inner circle of Death-Eaters. Yaxley's obviously one of them. They call themselves the Peverells - or something similar to that."

Blaise ears immediately pricked up.

"The Peverells?"

"You know about them, mate?"

"No, not at all."

And Blaise's mind was reeling. This was new, this was information they hadn't ever heard before - hell, he didn't even know what it was but it was definitely important.

They finally, finally had a lead.

Blaise told the other three Slytherins about the Peverells the moment he returned back to the apartment that evening. There was nothing but stunned silences in the wake of his words and he

relished in their confusion. It wasn't often that he saw Pansy and Theo speechless and, best of all, the look of hesitation on Draco's normally confident face.

"Well?" Blaise said, when a few seconds had ticked by and they were all still silent. "Do any of you know anything about it?"

Pansy and Theo immediately turned to Draco, who shrugged. "Nothing. But at least we know that Yaxley is a part of it - and, in all likelihood, Alecto Carrow too - "

"And Amycus," Theo added, before grinning. "Had a patrol with him today. Stupid prat was talking nineteen to the dozen, so I hit him with a silencing

charm. Then I used that spell - and he does have memory charms placed on him too."

Blaise frowned worriedly. "Did he - "

"Didn't suspect a bloody thing. For fuck's sake, Blaise, how careless do you think I am?"

"Very careless, remember that one time - "

"Save your banter for some other time, lovebirds," Pansy cut in, as she rolled her eyes. "Could we get back to the topic at hand? Draco? What should we do next?"

Draco pushed himself off the counter. "Give me a minute," he muttered, before heading straight into his room, leaving the other three staring after him with

matching befuddled expressions.

Theo was the first to break the silence. "Did he just fucking leave us in the middle of a conversation to shag Hermione?"

Pansy's eyebrows shot up. "They're shagging?"

"Just hazarding a guess. Give him a minute or two - maybe he'll start yelling 'Accio condom'."

Blaise snorted a sardonic laugh. "Talking about yourself there, mate?"

Theo smirked. "Why do you think your stash of condoms is always missing?"

"Bloody hell, Theo - "

"It was a fucking joke - "

"Hold on a second," Pansy intervened, glaring at Theo through narrowed eyes.

"Are you saying that you're the one who has been stealing the condoms? Blaise and I had to go without sex on those nights when there weren't any condoms and we were searching the whole bloody apartment just for that and you're telling me now that you stole them?"

"Technically, I did not steal them, I told them to come to me and they did. That's what the Accio spell's for, Pansy."

"Go fuck yourself, Theo - "

But Pansy trailed off when Draco re-emerged from his room, shutting the door behind him and casting muffling charms on the room. He strode back to them and pushed himself up on the counter again.

"Right, here's what we're going to do," he began, before turning to Blaise. "You

and I are going to do some research to find out who the hell the Peverells are. We'll go to the black market if we need more books. And you - " he turned to Theo now. "Granger says it's alright for you to view her memories. So take a look at the phial when you can. I'll need you and Parkinson to keep reviewing her memories. See if you can find any leads."

"Oh. So that's what you were doing back in your room," Blaise said, before looking pointedly at Theo.

"Of course," Draco shot Theo an unamused glance. "And Accio condom? Really?"

Theo grinned. "You heard that?"

"Yeah. And by the way, do you also

require Wingardium Leviosa before you shag?" Draco couldn't help but add, smirking when Pansy and Blaise began to laugh. He hoped the girl inside the room was laughing too, because he'd said it loud enough just for her to hear.

Hermione sat on the bed some days later with a slip of paper in her hand and the telephone right next to her. The paper was yellow and faded, slightly wrinkled from the creases she'd made as she gripped it between her fingertips. She felt like she'd been sitting in the same position for half a lifetime, when in all actuality it was a mere few hours.

She could still remember what Draco had said the previous night. It seemed like the both of them had gotten back to their old footing - or perhaps a place better than where they used to be. And Draco had told her about the places he went to find her the past three years.

"I'd stay behind to check the place after each patrol," he had said, his eyes downcast as though he couldn't quite meet her gaze. But this wasn't a surprise to her. She knew this, because she always heard him and that was the only reason why she could never forget him.

She knew he was sorry that he couldn't find her for so long. But it wasn't his fault. How could it be his fault when he had been the only one not to give up

looking for her?

Well, one of the two people. His aunt Andromeda was the other.

"She's the one who told me about you in the first place. She said that if I really wanted to - fix the mess I made, then I'd help to look for you. She thought that I'd be able to help more than anyone because I'm a Death-Eater - but, well, I didn't fucking know anything for three whole years."

This was all new to Hermione. She felt heartened to know that there was someone out there, apart from Draco, who cared about her during her imprisonment. "Will you thank your aunt for me?" She had asked, but he'd simply smirked.

"You can thank her yourself, Granger," he replied evenly. He reached over to open the drawer from the bedside table and after shuffling through the items in it for a moment, he fished out a piece of paper. "That's her number. She's the only reason why I have a bloody telephone in my room."

And so Hermione found herself sitting next to the telephone now, her mind reeling with apprehension and anxiety.

This was different - this was talking to someone other than the four who lived in the apartment. She didn't know Andromeda - or maybe she did, but she just couldn't remember anymore. Andromeda was a complete stranger.

But nevertheless, she knew she owed

Andromeda her life. And it was with this newfound admission that she drew in a deep breath and picked up the phone.

Her fingers were trembling as she dialled the number. There were three rings, and then -

"Password, please."

Hermione froze at the decidedly feminine voice on the other end of the line. Her mouth was dry and her heart was pounding. She wished desperately that Draco was by her side at the moment.

"Password, please," the other person sounded far more cautious this time.

Hermione gripped the phone tightly.

"An-andromeda?"

There was a startled pause. A few

seconds ticked by before the person spoke again. "Who is this?"

"I-I'm - Her -"

"Hermione?" The person drew in a sharp breath. "Hermione Granger, is that you?"

"Yes," Hermione forced out, trying to sound calm amidst her skittering nerves.

"Hello, Andromeda."

Another pause. And then there came a relieved sigh from the other end.

"Hermione, I'm so glad to hear from you! Are you well?"

"Yes, I am. I just called to talk to you - and thank you, mostly, for - well..."

"You're very welcome, it was the least I could do," Andromeda assured her. Her voice was lilting and almost maternal,

and Hermione found herself warming up to the woman instantly. "Does Draco treat you well?"

Hermione felt her anxiety quickly dissipating at the mention of Draco's name. "Oh, yes, he does...he's wonderful."

If Andromeda noticed the stilted answers on Hermione's end, she didn't say a thing about it. "I'm glad. Tell me, how is Draco? Draco's been far too busy to call me and I've been worrying."

Hermione smiled at that. She settled back against the wall along the left side of the bed, grabbing a pillow and hugging it to her chest. It wasn't easy to talk to Andromeda - or to anyone else but Draco, for that matter - about herself,

because words didn't come easy to her anymore.

But she talked to Andromeda about Draco - about mornings and afternoons and evenings spent with Draco, about how clever he was at magic and how brave he was in a time like this - and the words didn't fail her this time, because it was Draco and talking about him was easier than breathing.

Draco didn't expect to see Hermione on the phone when he returned home that afternoon. She glanced up when he shut the door and hastily pushed herself up, her eyes lighting up when she saw him.

"You're back," she sounded genuinely relieved.

He went over to her, his rigid stance immediately relaxing when she wrapped her arms around him, burying her face against his neck. He could feel her warm breaths on his skin and the way her hair tickled his chin; and he shut his eyes for a brief moment because, with her, it often felt like the war and everything else had faded out, if only for awhile.

But it didn't last long, and he reluctantly pulled back before gesturing to the phone in her hand. "How long have you been talking to Dromeda?"

"All afternoon," she held the phone up to him. "Would you like to talk to her?"

Draco took the phone from Hermione,

settling down beside her on the bed and pressed the phone to his ear.

"Dromeda?"

"Ah, there you are," Andromeda sounded thoroughly amused. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten all about your old aunt now that you've got Hermione."

He didn't miss the teasing lilt in his aunt's voice and didn't know whether to be annoyed or embarrassed. Merlin, if his aunt acted this way, he couldn't imagine how it'd be like if his mother...

No. Those were dangerous territories. Draco cleared the thoughts out from his head and focused on the conversation. "I've been busy. How've you been, Dromeda? Any word on your end?"

"I presume you mean about the Order.

Well, it's still inactive. Last I heard they've set up camp somewhere, but it's more of a safehouse than anything - I don't think they'll be going back into the battlefield anytime soon."

Draco made an aggravated noise. The bloody Order. Where the hell was all their stupid Gryffindor tenacity and Ravenclaw ingenuity and Hufflepuff righteousness at a time like this?

"I'm sorry, Draco," his aunt sounded truly contrite, but it wasn't even her fault and his annoyance wasn't directed at her. "I wish things would speed up on their end but they still seem to be stuck in that rut they've been in for three years now."

"All that talk about Slytherin cowardice back in school but it seems that us

Slytherins are the only ones doing all the fighting now," Draco deadpanned, gratified when he heard his aunt chuckle and agree heartily.

"Well, I am proud of you, Draco, you know that. So is Hermione," his aunt added slyly. Draco couldn't help but let his gaze wander to the brunette who sat beside him quietly. She was reading a book that he'd given her several days ago, but her fingers were still casually intertwined with his.

He wondered if Andromeda and Hermione would still feel proud if they knew all the things he did. All the things he had started. And all the things he would do.

His jaw clenched. "Yes, save the

sentiment for some other time," he returned shortly. It seemed like this was his catchphrase with his aunt, but he couldn't help it.

Andromeda laughed. "Alright then, I'll be ringing off now. Take care, will you? And - "

"Stay safe?"

"Always."

He felt the knotted tension within him dissipate. She rang off, and he listened to the flat, monotonous beeping for a moment before setting the telephone aside.

"I like her," Hermione's voice broke the silence. There was a small, amused smile playing on her lips, her thumb tracing arbitrary patterns on Draco's skin

as she held his hand. It felt oddly comforting, even though he knew it was an unconscious action on her part.

"Dromeda?"

"Yes," Hermione pushed her book aside and glanced up at Draco. "She - she reminds me of you."

Draco's eyebrows rose. He'd never considered the possibility of being even remotely similar to Andromeda, mostly because she was the only one in his family who fought for the light, while the rest of them had always lingered in the deepest shadows.

"She makes me feel safe too," Hermione explained, when he didn't say anything.

Draco quite thought that he'd misheard. "You feel safe with me?"

"Of course," she didn't miss a beat.

Draco couldn't quite wrap his head around that idea. That Hermione felt safe with him, him - the most lethal Death-Eater and the one who brought about the most bloodshed during this war.

17 | quietus

1 7

q u i e t u s

Quietens sound.

It was one of those rare evenings where the house was empty when Hermione finally decided that she was ready to leave the room. Draco was dozing off in his chair - she noticed that he never actually did sleep properly, instead

preferring to take a quick shuteye whenever he could. But his wand was always, always beside him and the features on his face never relaxed.

Hermione couldn't help but watch him; the way his shoulders rose and fell steadily, and even while unconscious he seemed to exude this essence of confidence that she knew she could never pull off. Well, at least not now anyway. Pansy had told her that she used to be one of the brightest students during their Hogwarts days, and Hermione supposed that she had been a lot more confident back then.

"Confident, and aggravating," Theo hadn't minced his words one bit. "Merlin, Granger, you were fucking

annoying."

It was funny how they'd never gotten along in the past, which was a shame because Theo was idiotic and funny in the best possible way. And Draco was shrewd and arrogant in the best possible way too. She glanced over at him now and managed a fond smile. Maybe the war had changed them and their perspectives some.

So maybe good things did come out of a war.

"Do you always watch people sleep, Granger?" Draco's voice abruptly broke the silence and he slowly opened his eyes, watching her with thinly veiled amusement. Damn him and his heightened senses.

Hermione blushed rapidly. "Well, I wasn't - it wasn't like..."

"It's fine, Granger," he quickly cut in, when she began to flounder for a proper reply. He got up, his jumper rising over his lean hips to reveal a pale strip of skin as he stretched.

And he had to stifle a smirk when he noticed Hermione's eyes flitting over to him, her cheeks darkening further before hastily glancing away. It was nice to know that he wasn't the only one affected by her presence because, Merlin, he swore her scent and her lips and all of her just did his head in sometimes.

"Are you hungry?" He asked.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Actually, I was wondering if, maybe - maybe

you'd show me the rest of the house?"

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "You want to leave the room?"

"Just to look around."

She looked so bloody apprehensive and afraid that Draco felt something in his chest pull. "Sure, Granger."

He waited for her to climb out of bed and straighten her (well, his, actually) jumper. She took slow, unsteady steps towards the door and her hands were shaking, actually shaking, as she waited for him to undo the locks on the door.

"Go on," Draco said, once he'd pulled the door open.

She paused hesitantly by the doorway; her eyes fixed on him rather than on what was outside. And so Draco held out his

hand for her to take. "Come on."

She slipped her hand in his and automatically interlaced their fingers. And then she shifted slightly behind him, gripping onto the sleeve of his jumper. "Okay. I'm ready."

It was just a simple act of leaving the room, but Draco knew it meant more than that. It was like showing the world to a snail that had lived in its shell for so long. And the rest of the world was daunting - and at a time like this, frightening. So nothing about this process could be rushed.

Draco showed her the living room and the kitchen. He noticed the way Hermione's eyes lingered on the Wizard's chess set on the coffee table, a

thoughtful, confused expression slipping onto her features. The fucking Weasel loved playing Wizard's chess. Clearly, some things, however vague they were, could never quite be forgotten.

But Hermione soon lost interest in that, asking instead about which rooms were Pansy's, Blaise's and Theo's. He showed her Pansy and Blaise's shared one, as well as Theo's.

"It's right in the corner so we wouldn't hear him if he shags. The wanker sometimes forgets to put a silencing charm," Draco explained, gratified when Hermione laughed.

He briefly showed her the guest room, before going to the last room, which was the inventory. Maybe it was the

dismissive tone he used when talking about it, because Hermione didn't push or ask about it. Which suited him fine. He wasn't sure if he could risk Hermione's life by letting her know what they did.

Not yet, anyway.

"Draco? Are you awake?"

"Yeah." Draco almost smirked to himself in the darkness. This was quickly becoming a catchphrase with Hermione when she wanted to talk to him in the middle of the night.

"Do you - do you remember the time I punched you in the face?"

It was one of the few things he was certain he'd never forget. He glanced over at her, only to realize that she was already watching him with wide brown eyes. "What about it, Granger?"

"I think I remember why I did that," she began softly.

He froze.

"I used to think it was only because I was mad at you. But I think - and...correct me if I'm wrong," she continued, oblivious to the barely concealed tension on his face. "I think it had something to do with a...bird, or something - "

"A hippogriff," Draco offered, watching

her carefully. "Cross between a bird and a horse," he explained, when Hermione began to look confused. "In my defence, Granger, the bloody chicken injured me. It was mental and had to be executed."

Hermione blinked. "You tried to kill the hippogriff?"

"It was fucking mental!" Draco insisted, wondering why the conversation had suddenly taken a turn for the familiar, for the nostalgic, where the both of them had vastly differing opinions.

"It was an animal, Draco...you probably provoked it or something."

Draco automatically scowled and leaned back against his chair. "I'm not having this argument with you, Granger. Go back to sleep."

But he was surprised to hear Hermione chuckle in amusement as she settled back down on the pillow. Her gaze was soft as she stared up at him and she smiled. "I-I don't hate you for what you did back in Hogwarts."

"What?" He wondered if she was on to him, that she'd finally figured out that he was worried she'd remember the stupid things that he did and would start hating him for it, just the way she used to a long time ago.

"I remember you calling me a mudblood," she said, matter-of-factly. Her eyes drifted over to the scar on her arm that Bellatrix had branded her with and Draco felt his insides twist painfully. "And you making fun of me

back in school...it - it all comes in flashes, but even if I remember these things, it doesn't make me hate you, Draco."

Merlin, she knew. He didn't know how she did; she just had him all figured out. Hermione Granger had always been the brightest witch of their age anyway.

"Because it's all in the past," she added, after a moment's pause. "It's all forgotten."

And then something clicked. Something just fell into place.

Draco froze as realisation suddenly dawned on him. He could practically feel his mind racing, the extraneous, irrelevant thoughts evaporating as he focused on the one thing that mattered,

the one puzzle piece that had finally fit.
It's all forgotten.

It all comes in flashes.

Of course. It made sense why Granger's memory was all over the place, why she remembered some people and forgot about others, why she slowly began to remember things after awhile. And it was just a hunch, but Draco knew that his hunches were often right and it was this -

Someone had used Obliviate on Hermione Granger.

Pansy never hated herself more than she did on the nights when there was a full moon. It was always a harrowing night of screaming and crying and sleepless hours, and she hated that she had to involve the other three Slytherins because of her condition.

And when it was all over and done with, she was always an exhausted mess.

Blaise had dropped her off that morning with a quick kiss before hurrying off for his patrol. She had collapsed on the sofa thereafter, her body lead heavy and cheeks stained with dried tears, and had promptly fallen asleep.

She awoke sometime around eleven, her limbs stiff and aching. To her surprise, she found a blanket carefully placed

over her, along with a mug of tea on the coffee table. For a brief moment, she wondered if perhaps Blaise had returned, but a second glance at the blanket made her freeze.

It was Hermione.

Hermione had actually left the room, found her, and done all this for her. Pansy let out a soft chuckle of disbelief, reaching over to take a sip of the tea and was pleasantly surprised.

Well, one thing was for sure. Hermione Granger didn't remember much but she sure remembered how to make good tea. Pansy clambered to her feet, picked up the mug and blanket, and slowly made her way to Draco's room. Hermione answered after three knocks, looking

marginally relieved to see Pansy.

"Pansy, hi," Hermione breathed, a smile flitting across her face. "How - how are you feeling?"

"Oh, lots better, thanks to you." Hermione opened the door wider and Pansy made her way in, setting the blanket and mug down on the table. "I didn't realise you've been leaving the room."

"Not all the time," Hermione hedged, settling down on Draco's chair while Pansy sat on the table. "Draco brought me out some days ago - and I wanted some tea this morning so I came out, and found you in the living room."

"You make good tea."

Hermione smiled brightly. "I-I remember

making it a lot for myself in the past. At least - that's what I remember recently."

"What else do you remember?" Pansy couldn't help but ask. Patience and sensitivity had never really been two of her strong suits anyway.

"Well - Christmas," Hermione confessed, after a moment's pause. "Not much, but I remember decorating the tree. And - presents, I think people always gave me books for Christmas."

It was a conversation with Hermione that Pansy remembered clearly. So when she passed Diagon Alley with Draco several days later, she paused in front of one of the shops that sold Christmas trees. There was a wide range of trees, from white tipped ones to evergreen firs.

Despite the war, Christmas was one of the few holidays many people still celebrated.

Pansy and the others never celebrated Christmas, because merriment was just plain pointless thanks to their job description, but Pansy wondered if it was worth it this year, if only for Hermione. She tugged Draco to a stop and pointed out a particular tree to him. He shot her a flat look. "You know I fucking hate Christmas."

"Well, Blaise loves Christmas. And so does Hermione,' Pansy added pointedly. "She loves decorating the Christmas tree."

She smirked in triumph when Draco let out a heavy sigh, before stalking into the

shop and purchasing one of the most expensive, greenest ones, along with several other arbitrary ornaments he picked out.

And then, ever the gentleman, he made her lug the tree back to the apartment.

But Pansy thought it was very worth it to see the look of sheer happiness on Blaise's face when he saw the tree set up in the living room. Blaise immediately set down the book he was reading, crossing the room in quick strides and proceeding to kiss her soundly. "This is why I love you," he murmured, in between kisses.

Pansy smiled and was just about to reply when a shout of horror disrupted the overall merriment. Theo had just come

out of the kitchen and the look of utter disgust on his face was honestly laughable.

"What the fuck - " he turned to Draco. "What's a fucking plant doing in our living room? Mate - " and then he paused as Draco set a brown paper bag down on the coffee table. Draco shot Pansy a look, but Theo didn't catch it and continued heatedly, "there better be firewhisky and condoms in there or I swear on Salazar's grave, Draco, I will - "

His voice vanished as Pansy hit him with a silencing charm. Before he could remove the spell from himself, Blaise and Pansy had dragged him into the kitchen, where the counter blocked them

from plain view of the living room. Theo finally removed the spell and scowled at the happy couple.

"What the hell was that for?"

Pansy shook her head fondly at him.

"The tree's for Hermione, Theo. She spent three years in captivity, don't you think she deserves some holiday spirit to cheer her up?"

Theo scowled again but kept his mouth shut. Damn Pansy and her knack for effective guilt-tripping.

Draco thought he was rapidly losing his

mind. First, he'd bought a stupid Christmas tree. And then, he'd actually bought ornaments to go with the bloody tree. Stuff some pillows under his shirt and drape a red cloth over him and he might as well be Santa fucking Clause.

Hermione was reading, a hobby she had seemed to pick up again that reminded him very much of Hogwarts days. But she pushed aside her book the moment he entered the room, glancing up at him with a bright smile.

"Granger, there's a bloody Christmas tree in the living room," he said bluntly, before she could greet him. "Do you want to decorate it?"

Hermione's eyes widened and she immediately scrambled off the bed.

"Yes," she breathed, "you bought a Christmas tree?"

"Pansy's idea," Draco admitted, knowing that he couldn't take credit when it wasn't due. "She thought you might like one."

"I do love Christmas," Hermione readily agreed and took Draco's hand. He led her out of the room, aware that the others standing in the kitchen were all watching her expression closely.

Pansy was right - it was worth it, and the look on Hermione's face left no room for second-guessing. Her eyes lit up when she caught a glimpse of the tree, before her gaze travelled to the ornaments laid out on the coffee table and her smile widened. Then she glanced over at him,

over at the other three Slytherins, and back to him again.

Draco smirked. "All yours, Granger."

She needed no further encouragement.

Dropping his hand hesitantly, she went over to the coffee table and began selecting specific ornaments. Draco sauntered over to his friends and leaned against the counter beside Theo, who still seemed quite repulsed.

"She's choosing all the fucking Gryffindor colours," Theo hissed, making sure to keep his voice low so that Hermione couldn't hear. "Look! Red, gold, red, gold - "

"Strange," Pansy seemed quite amused.

"And we didn't even tell her the colours of her house. She couldn't even

remember which house she was in until I told her."

"You know what I see? I don't see red, gold, red, gold. All I see is Potter, Weasel, Potter, Weasel," Theo spat out their names like some sort of bad tasting food, and Draco couldn't help but smirk. The war had changed many things but not his entire belief system, and he completely and wholeheartedly agreed with Theo.

"But look how happy she is," Pansy said, with the kind of warmth they seldom heard from her. "I think we should all get her presents this Christmas."

Theo's mouth fell open. "What?"

"It's a great idea, baby," Blaise nodded.

"It's pointless for us to celebrate

Christmas for ourselves, but we could celebrate it for her. Theo?"

Theo made a reluctant noise of agreement. The four continued to watch Hermione for a moment, before Pansy broke the silence. "The red and gold ornaments are quite compatible with the green tree though, don't you think?"

Blaise wrapped his arms around her and laughed. "Ah, Christmas. The only time of the year where Gryffindor's colours actually matches Slytherin's."

But Draco wasn't listening. He found himself enraptured by the light on Hermione's face, hardly able to take his eyes off her as she decorated the tree. She seemed completely absorbed in the task, hardly noticing the other four

Slytherins in the kitchen. Her curls were in disarray and he watched as one of her brown locks caught on a branch, and she tugged it away quickly before going back to hanging a gold globe on that same branch.

It wasn't an earth-shattering moment, or one that Draco knew he would remember in years to come. It was this moment, a particular lazy afternoon during a chaotic time and a girl hanging ornaments on a stupid Christmas tree - when Draco Malfoy suddenly realised that he had feelings for Hermione Granger.

The realisation terrified him more than ever, but the adrenaline rush that quickly followed was just as exhilarating, and he

couldn't decide whether he loathed or
craved it.

18 | point

1 8

p o i n t m e

Wand behaves like a compass.

Hermione was slowly familiarising herself with the apartment. Every morning, after the four Slytherins had left, she'd venture out of the room. She'd head straight for the kitchen to make a pot of tea - wandless, of course, because she didn't dare to use magic unsupervised - before returning back into the room.

But Hermione was feeling more confident this particular morning, and after she'd made her tea, she lingered in the kitchen for awhile. The kitchen was almost immaculate, and she'd learnt from Draco sometime back that it was all Blaise's work, the only one among the four who was adept at using magic in the kitchen.

She checked the shelves out of curiosity, only to find it stocked full with potions and unknown ingredients. And then paused when she came across a large box of chocolate frogs. Picking up one of the small boxes inside, she studied it carefully.

"Are you going to eat that?"

An unfamiliar feminine voice made

Hermione jump and drop the box in fright. A chocolate frog immediately leapt out of the box, heading straight for the living room, but Hermione didn't even notice. She was far too busy staring in horror at the other girl standing by the counter.

The girl made a grab for the frog as it leapt past her, swearing under her breath when it escaped. "You're supposed to grab them before they jump out of the box. Where's my bloody wand?" She muttered, making a few more futile swipes after the frog, before casting a brief glance over her shoulder at Hermione. "Who are you, by the way?" Hermione froze.

"No, seriously, you look familiar," the

girl continued, when Hermione kept silent. "Merlin, this thing is just out of control!" She shook her head as the frog kept hopping away. "So anyway, have we met before? I think I - "

"Immobulus."

The frog immediately went still, and Hermione let out a sigh of relief when she saw Theo standing by the doorway of his room, a wand in his hand. He looked thoroughly aggravated, but there was a glimmer of fear in his eyes as he met Hermione's gaze.

"I thought you were leaving, Natasha," he said calmly, striding towards the girl who smiled brightly at him.

"I was, but then I met your flatmate. I can't place a finger on where I've seen

her before. Who is she - "

"Her name's Hermione Granger," Theo returned flatly. He strode towards the girl quickly and held up his wand to her temple.

Her eyes widened. "Theo? What are you - "

"Sorry, Natasha, but you shouldn't have asked."

A jet of light shot out from the wand and Hermione watched as the girl's eyes went momentarily blank for a moment. Then the girl blinked, looking utterly dazed and Theo caught her as she swayed.

He glanced over at Hermione. "I just have to send her home. I'll be back soon."

Hermione could only manage a faint smile, watching with rapt attention as he went over to the shelves, grabbed something, and vanished with the girl.

Then the house was silent and Hermione's head was reeling with the aftermath of the shock. Thank Merlin for Theo. She didn't know what she would've done if he wasn't there. None of them had actually pre-empted such a situation, so she was completely taken unaware by it.

Hermione could still feel her heart racing, and she took several deep breaths to calm herself. Then she went over to pick up the chocolate frog from under the coffee table, studying it with amusement. She was still staring at the

frog and contemplating the earlier situation when Theo returned.

"Don't eat that," his voice startled her and she jumped, dropping the frog again. He grinned. "You're fucking jittery, Hermione. Here," he went over to the box of chocolate frogs and picked out a new one for her. "Throw out the old one."

Hermione set the old frog aside and carefully opened the new box, making sure to grab the frog before it got away. She chewed slowly on the frog while studying the card in fascination, which had a portrait of an old man called Albus Dumbledore on it.

"You remember him?" Theo asked bluntly, after watching her for a moment

or two.

A frown glossed her forehead and she looked up at Theo in confusion. "Am I supposed to?"

He grinned wryly. "He was kind of our Headmaster back at Hogwarts, only he's dead now."

"Oh." Hermione felt a faint pang of guilt for not feeling more distressed about the fate of Albus Dumbledore, but he was just a stranger to her. She set the card aside and looked back up at Theo, only to see him rubbing his temples, a tired frown on his forehead. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah. Just a bloody hangover, that's all."

Hermione quickly got up to retrieve a

clean glass and the pot of tea. Setting the cup down in front of Theo, she poured a generous amount of tea in and pushed it towards him.

Theo nursed it between his hands before taking a quick sip of it and looked pleasantly surprised. "You made this?"

"Yes."

"It's pretty fucking good."

"Thank you." Hermione watched him for awhile, wondering if he was going to take his cup and go back to his room, but he made no attempt to leave.

"Don't...don't you have to go to - " and then she didn't quite know what to call it, because she knew the four Slytherins worked for Voldemort but it couldn't be called work if it didn't help anyone but

Voldemort himself.

" - the dark side?" Theo supplied, his words making Hermione smile. "Yeah, no. I've got another Death-Eater to cover for me today. We don't have to go for patrols or missions so long as we've got someone to stand in for us."

Hermione frowned in confusion. "But...wouldn't he notice?"

"Well, he's become a lot more complacent ever since winning the war."

Hermione's eyes widened at Theo's casual jab, but he simply smirked.

"Hermione, I work for him but that doesn't mean I fucking adore him. Neither does Blaise or Pansy - and Draco? I think Draco hates him the most. You know that whole saying - 'keep your

friends close, enemies closer'? The Dark Lord's got that going for him and he's so stupid he doesn't even see that his top Death-Eater's gone rogue ever since the war began."

Hermione smiled. She hated the idea of Death-Eaters in general, but somehow Draco being a Death-Eater gone rogue wasn't such a bad idea. She worried for his safety, of course, she always did - but she couldn't help but think he was just so clever.

"You're thinking about Draco, aren't you?" Theo's smirk widened.

And Hermione blushed.

"It's okay, Hermione. Just don't pull all that love crap that Pansy and Blaise always does in front of me and I honestly

wouldn't give a shit. Anyway, the Dark Lord's inner circle has expanded ever since the war began and we're close to a hundred over people now - that's notwithstanding the rest of his army. No one keeps tabs on us. Only Draco and some of the other Death-Eaters meet up with the Dark Lord everyday to discuss their plans. The rest of us just have to show up during general meetings."

"So...does that mean you're going to be here, for the rest of the day?"

"That's right. And you're going to entertain me."

Her eyebrows shot up. "How?"

"Well, I'll find things that make you blush - I think that's pretty bloody entertaining."

Hermione scowled when her cheeks reddened again. Merlin, if this was the way Theo was back at Hogwarts, it was no wonder she hated him.

Theo noticed and laughed. "That's one."

Draco half thought he was hallucinating when he returned back home that day, only to see Hermione sitting at the kitchen counter with Theo. They had boxes of chocolate frogs in front of them, most of which was emptied out, the wrappers and cards strewn around carelessly.

Hermione spotted Draco immediately and smiled brightly. "Hey," she breathed,

climbing down from the chair and going over to him. Draco tried not to react when she slotted between his arms and buried her face against his chest, because Theo was staring quite blatantly, a perennially annoying smirk on his face.

"I had a lot of fun today," Hermione said, once she'd pulled back from him. But it didn't escape his notice that she still kept her fingers latched on his coat. "Theo taught me how to use Tarantellegra."

Draco shot Theo an unamused look. "Of course he would."

Theo laughed. "How was work today, mate?"

"Busy as fuck, no thanks to you," Draco replied calmly, before heading towards

his room. He didn't have to glance back to know that Hermione was following him. "By the way, it's your turn to get dinner tonight."

"Why is it never your turn?"

"Because I fucking pay for all our expenses," Draco said, before shutting the door behind him and Hermione. He casted wordless muffling and locking charms on the room before reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a brown box. "This came for you. It's from Andromeda," he added, when Hermione looked up at him in surprise.

Hermione took it, a happy smile glossing her lips as she sat down on the bed and began to open it. Draco settled down next to her, watching as she read and

reread and reread several more times the little slip of paper that was tagged to the box.

Have a very Merry Christmas,
- A.T.

"The Tales of Beedle the Bard," Hermione read out loud, when she shifted the paper and saw the book inside. She turned to Draco. "Have you you read this?"

"No, never," Draco frowned at the book. It looked awfully similar to those books he'd read as a child, but he hadn't seen one of this in ages ever since the war began. He thought Andromeda's present to Hermione was odd, to say the least.

At least his present made sense. He reached into the other pocket of his coat and retrieved an old photo frame that Andromeda had sent him.

"Is - is that your mother?" Hermione asked, as she stared at the blonde haired woman standing beside Andromeda in the photograph.

"Yes," Draco felt his chest tighten as he looked at the picture, so he set it aside on the bedside table. "You remember her?"

Hermione frowned and stared at the picture for several moments longer. "You look a lot like her," she finally said and smiled. Then she rested her head against his shoulder and began to read the book Andromeda had sent.

Draco thought about Hermione's words and realised that he could live with that. He'd much rather be told that he looked like his mother, than be the splitting image of the man he had come to loathe with every fibre of his being.

It all came back sometime in the middle of the night, and in the middle of a dream.

Hermione was having another one of her nightmares, one that didn't quite make her scream in terror but left a slow, sinking feeling of dread in her chest. Her dream proceeded in the usual fashion - a chorus of Crucios, an eternity of

torturing and a silent scream wedged in her throat with Draco calling her name as he searched for her frantically, but she could never see him.

But this time, the voices of her captors seemed to change. Their chorus of Crucios morphed into something else, into a sentence she had long forgotten and made her heart still in fear when she heard it loud and clear in her subconscious once again -

"Tell us - where are the Deathly Hallows?"

Draco was awoken in the middle of the

night when Hermione's fingers convulsed between his. He cast a quick Muffliato just seconds before she began to thrash around, and he quickly got up from the chair and settled down next to her on the bed. Taking her by the shoulders, he hauled her into sitting position and cupped her cheeks, ignoring the blows she rained down on him.

"Granger," his voice was calm. After all, he'd dealt with this so often that it never fazed him anymore. "Granger, wake up." Hermione's eyes slowly focused on him after several minutes. "Draco?"

"Yeah, it's me."

She let out a haggard sigh of relief and he held her, letting her bury her face against his neck and slide her arms

around his waist. "I remember," she murmured at last, her voice achingly soft and broken.

"What?"

"I-I remember why I was captured."

Draco stiffened. He pulled back from Hermione, holding her gently at arm's length. "What did you say?"

Her smile was faint but trusting, and she leaned forward to grasp his hands tightly. "I really do remember. They asked me - " she took a deep breath, calming the shudder that seemed to wreck through her like the aftermath of an earthquake. "They asked me where the Deathly Hallows were."

Draco stared at her in confusion. "What?"

"It - it was in the book. I read it earlier and I didn't think much of it...but then I had that nightmare and I remembered," she explained, scrambling up to reach for the book on the bedside table. Draco immediately summoned his wand to him, lighting it up with a silent Lumos. He saw that it was the one Andromeda had given to Hermione.

"The Tale of Three Brothers," Hermione began, flipping through the pages haphazardly and pointing to various paragraphs. "Three brothers. They met Death, and Death said they could have anything they want. The oldest brother - he wanted a powerful wand that Death fashioned from an elder tree."

Draco froze.

"The second one wanted a stone that could bring back the dead. And - and the third wanted a cloak of invisibility. These are the Deathly Hallows."

Draco's mind was reeling. "And the Death-Eaters who captured you wanted you to tell them where they were?"

"Yes. They call themselves - The Peverells."

And then Draco, who'd always prided himself on having a way with words, found himself completely speechless.

The other three Slytherins were quick to come out of their respective rooms when Draco knocked on their doors in the

middle of the night. They had their wands with them, faces alert with the knowledge that nothing good ever happened past midnight and that anything could happen during a war.

But it was different this time round, and the three of them were utterly surprised to see Draco calmly sitting at the kitchen counter. And even more surprised to see Hermione in the kitchen boiling a fresh pot of tea.

"This had better be good," grumbled Theo, as he sat next to Draco and promptly placed his head on the table. Blaise and Pansy sat down opposite them, looking tired but curious nonetheless.

"It is," Draco returned shortly. He

waited until Hermione had returned with the tea and poured out cups for everyone. Hermione sat on the other side of Draco, leaning in close as her hand automatically latched onto his jumper.

"Alright, listen up," Draco started and paused, reaching over to grab Theo by the scruff of his neck because the idiot was actually falling asleep again. "Granger has something to say."

Hermione's eyes widened when the rest of them turned to her. "I-I thought you were going to tell them for me," she said to Draco, sounding rather alarmed and overwhelmed all at once.

Draco simply smirked. "No, it's your story to tell, Granger."

So, amidst shades of blushes and

occasional stammering, Hermione slowly revealed everything that she had recalled that night. About the Deathly Hallows - the wand, the stone and the cloak - about the Peverells and what they wanted from her. And when she was done, everyone was silent.

Hermione swallowed hard and bit her lip. She could practically see them internalising her information. Blaise was thinking hard, she could almost hear the gears whirring in his head; while Pansy looked utterly surprised and Theo was just confused.

"So what you're saying," Blaise broke the silence at last, "is that all this while, we've been chasing for leads when the real lead all along was with Hermione?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "You've been searching for the Deathly Hallows too?"

"Not the Deathly Hallows," Pansy corrected her quickly, "the Peverells. Some days ago, we received a tip-off that there's a secret organisation within the Dark Lord's inner circle. They call themselves the Peverells, so if they're one and the same, then those are the same Death-Eaters that captured you. We've been trying to sniff them out but it hasn't been easy."

"Why - why would you want to find them?" Hermione sounded even more confused now, and Theo began to chuckle in amusement, only for Draco to smack him soundly on the head.

"Ow!" Theo glared at his friend, before

grinning at Hermione. "Because, Hermione, that's what we do. Remember what I told you about us hating the Dark Lord? That's kind of part and parcel of the whole hating campaign."

Blaise rolled his eyes. "What Theo meant to say was - we're Death-Eaters gone rogue. We strive to end this war; that's our ultimate goal. That's the only reason why we're still here and why we struggle so hard to stay alive."

"You guys - " Hermione still seemed rather unsure, "do you guys help the Order?"

"No." The response was immediate and came from all four of the Slytherins, and both Theo and Draco looked somewhat disgusted.

"No," Pansy repeated, softer this time. She smiled at Hermione, who seemed rather taken aback by the vehemence of their response. "We don't help the Order. Because the Order is in a pretty bad shape - "

"More like fucked-up - "

" - thanks for your input, Theo," Pansy scowled at him and turned back to Hermione. "The Order isn't even equipped to fight one-tenth of the Dark Lord's army, especially since the Dark Lord's been recruiting so much over the years. They're practically in pieces. So as for us, we simply get information. That's what all the phials are for. We get information about the Order and prevent it from ever reaching the Dark Lord. So,

for instance, if we chance upon a traitor of the Order going over to the Dark Lord's side, we stop him, extract his memories and kill him right after," she finished bluntly.

"Similarly," Blaise chimed in, grinning when Hermione's mouth fell open in abject horror, "if we find a Death-Eater who isn't loyal to the Dark Lord, we extract his memories, show it to the Dark Lord and let the Dark Lord kill the traitor off himself. That's called thinning out the army, so we prevent the Dark Lord's army from growing. It's all very bloody and brutal, really."

"You couldn't have put it in a fucking nicer way?" Draco growled at Blaise, glancing over at Hermione, who was

clutching the sleeve of his jumper tightly. He'd been silent all this while, leaving the explanation up to the rest of them, but he wondered how Hermione would react if she knew that this, all of this, was a plan he'd masterminded.

"Sorry," Blaise shrugged apologetically at her.

"It's fine," Hermione replied, after a moment's pause. Then she smiled faintly. "There just seems to be a lot of - killing, though."

Theo chuckled. "It's a fucking war, Hermione, and we're Death-Eaters. It's either kill or be killed."

"Besides, we just want the war to end," Pansy added. "We've been living on the edge for three years and we'd rather the

war not last for another three."

Hermione was silent for a long moment. "Right," she said at last, and her voice was barely audible. Her fingers tightened around Draco's jumper and she took a deep breath. "And this - this is the only way the war can end?"

The other three looked at Draco, who simply shrugged. "It's the only way we know how to end the war, Granger."

"I see," Hermione breathed, and looked directly at Draco with a tiny smile playing on her lips. "So - can I help?"

19 | crucio

1 9
c r u c i o
Torture.

A prolonged, stunned silence followed in the wake of Hermione's words, and she swallowed uncomfortably, wondering if she'd been far too presumptuous. Perhaps they didn't want her to help. After all, she was just

beginning to learn magic all over again and her skills were nothing compared to theirs.

"Granger," Draco's voice broke the tensed silence. His face was an expression of indifference, and his silver eyes were closed-off. She couldn't tell what he was thinking. "I need a word with you."

He stood up abruptly and headed back into his room. After a moment's pause, Hermione followed, leaving the three other Slytherins behind.

Theo let out a chuckle when Hermione shut the door after her. "You think they're going to come back out?"

"Probably not," Blaise said, and

yawned. He grabbed his wand, directing the emptied mugs over to the sink before standing up. "We should go back to sleep. If we can."

"Night, Theo," Pansy called, as the three of them went back to their rooms - she and Blaise to their shared one, and Theo to his.

"Dream of me, Pansy."

"You wish."

"Better yet - dream of me and Blaise. That'd be one hell of a dream, huh?"

"Goodnight, Theo."

Hermione was apprehensive. She shut the door behind her carefully and went over to Draco, gingerly sitting down on the bed next to him. He was unnervingly silent, the same sort of distant attitude he had when he tried to keep his distance from her in the past.

"You're not going to be a part of this," Draco said, after awhile. His voice was tight and choked. "It's too big a risk, Granger."

"I know that," Hermione replied calmly.

"You are aware of the risks the four of us take every single bloody day, aren't you?"

"Yes - "

"No, you're not. We carry out missions and patrols with the other Death-Eaters

every day, not knowing when one of them might find out that we've gone rogue and hit us in the back with a killing curse. I stay by the Dark Lord's side, every single bloody day, not knowing when my skill at Occlumency would fail me and the Dark Lord would navigate his way through my mind in a second and know that I'm a traitor."

Hermione hadn't thought of it this way, because she hadn't known. But now she did - and frankly, it only made her resolve strengthen. "But - you still do it," she murmured softly, "you still stay by his side. For all these years."

He didn't answer.

And she took that as a sign to continue. Inching closer, she reached for his hand

and intertwined her fingers with his. Her hand seemed almost fragile in his grasp, but she felt safe, in spite of all that he had just said.

"Which is why I'd like to help," Hermione said, and his head jerked up, eyes meeting hers. She could see the sliver of intense fear reflected in them, of sheer desperation, and it was almost crushing. "I don't care much for this war...it's not my fight any longer, hasn't been for quite awhile now. But, if ending the war would mean that Theo and Blaise and Pansy and you are all safe, then I - I think it's a fight I'd like to be a part of."

Draco let out a sigh that seemed exhausted and leaned forward to bury

his face in his hands. She didn't think he ever sounded this tired before. Like all the three years of sleepless nights had come rushing back all at once and everything was just physically crushing. When he spoke, his voice was rough and unsteady. "I just can't fucking lose you again, Granger."

Hermione reached over to pull his hands away from his face. And she saw the weary lines on his face now, the tired frown and the hard line of his lips and the clenching of the jaw. Grasping his hands firmly between hers, she pressed a soft kiss to his knuckles.

"I can't lose you again either," she whispered, and smiled. "So let me fight your war."

He was silent for what seemed like forever. Then he sighed again and Hermione smiled because it was a sigh of resignation.

Draco summoned his wand. "Hold still," he murmured, lifting his wand to her forehead. When she looked up at him in surprise, he hastened to explain, "memory locks. So even if someone uses Legilimency on you, they won't find out what you know. Just in case," he added, but Hermione heard the implications of his words loud and clear.

Just in case we fail.

Just in case you get captured again.

Just in case I lose you.

The screams of the tortured prisoners could be heard all the way from the basement of the Malfoy Manor. It was just one of those daily meetings Draco had with the Dark Lord and several other esteemed Death-Eaters, but Draco loathed those meetings more than ever, because he always felt completely outnumbered without Theo, Pansy and Blaise in the same room.

"What's taking Yaxley so long?" Bellatrix was looking more impatient by the minute as she heard the screams. She was clutching her wand with anticipation, and Draco knew that she

was positively itching to go down to the basement and torture the prisoners herself.

"Patience, Bellatrix," the Dark Lord said, but there was a tick in his jaw and he seemed rather aggravated.

Amycus Carrow leaned forward with an earnest expression on his face. "My lord, these prisoners are trained to withstand the Cruciatus. It would take awhile before they give up information worth something - "

"Or," Draco interrupted bluntly, "Yaxley could be doing a shite job at torturing them."

"Yaxley knows how to use the Cruciatus - "

Draco rolled his eyes. "Obviously. But

the extent of pain inflicted on a victim is proportional to how much you want to hurt them. We've been waiting for close to an hour now - seems like Yaxley's being soft about it."

"You bloody little - "

"That's quite enough, Amycus," the Dark Lord cut in, "it seems like Draco's right. It's time to go down to the basement and see what Yaxley's up to."

He stood up and the rest of the Death-Eaters followed in an orderly fashion. Draco made sure to smirk at Amycus, just to rub the Dark Lord's blatant favouritism in the man's face. Frankly, what he really wanted to do was to hit Amycus with countless of Crucios, as payback for what he'd done to

Hermione. Draco made a mental note to do that when the time was right. Revenge was going to be so sweet.

They soon found Yaxley in the dungeons, standing in front of a group of prisoners, his wand tight in hand. The prisoners were in a bloodied, decrepit state, but none seemed on the brink of insanity or death, and Draco immediately knew that Yaxley had been torturing them for something else altogether.

The Deathly Hallows.

Thanks to Hermione, things were so much clearer now.

Yaxley turned when he heard footsteps, his face falling when he saw the grim expression on the Dark Lord's face. "M-my lord," he stammered, but the Dark

Lord ignored him, turning instead to the other Death-Eaters.

"Bellatrix," the Dark Lord directed, in his deathly calm manner that always sent a shiver down Draco's spine. "Take over the interrogation, please."

Bellatrix grinned and stepped up, shoving Yaxley aside roughly. Her long, bony fingers were wrapped around her wand.

"And Draco?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"For every Cruciatus that Bellatrix uses on the prisoners, I'd like you to use it on Yaxley over here."

Yaxley paled. And Draco smirked. "With pleasure, my lord."

"You may begin."

Bellatrix promptly hurled a Cruciatus at one of the prisoners, cackling with glee when the victim screamed, this time far louder than all the screams they'd heard over the past hour.

Draco didn't even flinch. And perhaps Bellatrix was right - maybe he was somewhat like her, because he was just as good as she was in compartmentalising his emotions and blocking out every good sentiment he had in him.

So he didn't even feel a single ounce of guilt when he stepped forward and pointed his wand directly at Yaxley. He thought of Hermione and all the scars on her skin and all the nights she woke up screaming and all the tears she had shed.

This wasn't a show for the Dark Lord. His wand was poised to torture and it was going to fucking hurt.

"Crucio."

Hermione was pleased to find Theo sitting at the kitchen counter when she left the room that afternoon. He was having lunch and when he spotted her, he nodded amicably. "Afternoon, Red."

Hermione blinked, pausing briefly in her tracks. "What - what did you just call me?"

"Red," Theo repeated, and grinned. "It's

far shorter than actually calling you Hermione, and Draco would probably hit me if I called you Frizzy-Haired Freak, so I'm settling for Red - because you blush. A hell lot."

Hermione wondered if the old version of herself would've taken offense to Theo's straightforward mannerism, but she was more amused than anything now. She smiled and settled down on the stool opposite him at the counter. Theo immediately pushed an unopened carton of food over to her and she eagerly opened it.

"Aren't you going to work?"

"I'm done with the morning patrol," Theo spoke with his mouth full. Hermione thought it looked vaguely familiar but

she couldn't remember where she'd seen it before. It definitely didn't come from Draco, who had impeccable manners when eating. "There's another in the afternoon and later at night."

Hermione once again thought her decision to join in the fight was worthwhile. She didn't want Theo to go on patrols or see him look this tired. All four of the Slytherins seemed exhausted most of the time and she knew perfectly why. The war had forced them into growing up far too soon, and sometimes it felt like they were all over a hundred years old. They were just that tired.

And so Hermione thought the war needed to end so that maybe, just maybe, they could finally get that sorely-needed

rest.

"By the way," Theo was saying, his voice breaking into her thoughts. "Draco told us this morning that you were joining 17-65. He's paranoid about it but I think it'll be fun."

Hermione frowned in confusion. "What's 17-65?"

"Well, the four of us - sorry, five, including you - are in a fucking cool top-secret group, aren't we? So we obviously needed a fucking cool top-secret name. To be honest, I wanted to call us The Anti-Potters because, well, we're not bloody losers like him."

Hermione laughed and Theo grinned back, clearly pleased by her reaction.

"But Draco picked 17-65 instead which,

by the way, are coordinates of the actual constellation Draco. So he basically named the group after himself, that bloody narcissist."

Hermione laughed again, then paused as she thought it over. The numbers seemed awfully familiar. "Wait," she said, suddenly remembering, "17-65...that number that was part of the incantation. I used that to light the phial to call for help."

"Yeah," Theo nodded. "We use that number as part of the Protean charm. It's how we contact each other."

Hermione fingers automatically went to the chain around her neck, clutching the two phials that hung at the bottom. It was clever. The charm had practically saved

her life. Well, Theo did, to be exact; but the charm really helped too.

"You know what we should do?" Theo suddenly said, and pushed his carton of food aside. "We could train you up."

"What?"

"I could teach you how to duel. It'll come in handy, especially now that you're one of us," Theo explained and grinned. "I don't like to brag - well, actually, I do - but I'm better than Blaise and Pansy at duelling. Of course, Draco's still way better. He's the one who taught me, after all."

"He - he trained you?"

"Yeah, back when I first started out as a Death-Eater. If I weren't for him, I would've fucked up on a lot of

missions." Theo stood up and picked up his wand. "But enough about that wanker, we'll train you now. It'll be fun, Red. Come on."

Hermione smiled and got up eagerly. "I have to get my wand," she told him, rushing hastily back into Draco's room. She found the spare wand that Draco had given her on the dresser and came back out.

Theo was already shifting various pieces of furniture aside with his wand to clear a space in the living room. When he was done, he stood a fair distance away from Hermione.

"Alright. I'm going to teach you a fairly simple spell. It's called the Knockback jinx. Basically, when you fire at me, it

knocks me over, or back - depending on how steady I am on my feet and how strong the spell is."

Hermione nodded. Having been taught by both Blaise and now Theo, she thought that they sounded far more laidback than Draco, who tended to be entirely focused and professional when teaching her.

"You move your wand like this," Theo did a brief demonstration, which Hermione immediately mimicked. "And say Flipendo."

"Flipendo," she repeated, saying it a few more times under her breath to memorise it.

"Right. I'll do it first." Theo summoned a green apple from the fruit basket in the

kitchen. He took several steps away from Hermione, and threw the apple upwards, casting the spell quickly when it was still in mid-air.

"Flipendo."

Immediately, the apple burst into tiny fragments that scattered across the walls and floor. Theo laughed. "Oh, well, Blaise'll clean that up. Now your turn, Red. No apples this time. Aim it right at me."

Hermione's mouth fell open in horror. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

"You wouldn't. That's just what the spell does to small objects. But it'll just knock me off my feet; probably send me sprawling on the ground. It's nothing I can't handle," Theo assured her, and

dropped his wand. "Go ahead."

Hermione took a deep breath. Her wand shook in her hand and she felt guilt kick in at the mere thought of possibly hurting Theo. "Fli-flipendo."

Nothing happened.

"Try it again."

"Flipendo."

A faint jet of light streaked out this time, but it didn't even reach him, let alone hit him. And Hermione was left shaking at the thought of the spell heading straight for Theo. It was a thought that terrified her.

Theo frowned. "You have to want to knock me back, Red."

"That's the thing - I don't want to!"

"You wouldn't hurt me."

"But I could," Hermione insisted, her eyes downcast. "I'm afraid - I'm afraid no good at this. Sorry, Theo."

"S'alright."

Theo watched as Hermione sighed and went back to the kitchen counter, setting her wand aside firmly. He followed, placing his wand on the other side and picking up his carton of food again.

"You know," he began, conversationally, just to break the silence. "You used to be pretty good at duelling back during Hogwarts days."

Hermione was surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah. There was that one time - in our second year, I think, when you and Millicent Bulstrode had to duel. You kept hitting her with the disarming spell

until she lost her temper and put you in a headlock and the both of you were rolling on the floor screaming at each other."

Hermione was appalled. "Did I hurt her?" She asked, in concern.

Theo shook his head. "Hardly. But I've got to admit, that's one hot lesson I'll never be able to forget," he added, with an amused chuckle.

And when Hermione began to laugh, Theo tried to crack more stupid jokes, because hearing Hermione Granger laugh was the only way he could forget that this was a war, and that Millicent Bulstrode was now dead.

"Crucio."

Draco watched impassively as Yaxley convulsed on the floor again. As with all the other Cruciatus curses Draco had shot at him, Yaxley remained silent. Draco wasn't surprised. As Death-Eaters, they were frequently punished if they failed - either by the Dark Lord or by each other; and had long ago learnt that the more readily they accepted their punishment, the quicker it was over for them.

Yaxley quietly spat out a mouthful of blood and glared at Draco. His glare was cold and deadly enough to kill, but

Draco being Draco didn't even turn a hair.

"Crucio."

Bellatrix's prisoner looked far worse than Yaxley did. And Draco knew it was because Bellatrix was sadistic enough and practically thrived on making her enemies suffer. The prisoner had screamed himself hoarse about four Crucios ago, and was now a quivering mess of blood, sweat and vomit.

"Well?" Bellatrix smirked down at him.

"Still nothing?"

He whimpered.

"Alright then," Bellatrix lifted her wand and aimed it at him, casting a sideways glance at Draco, who aimed his wand at Yaxley. "Cru - "

"Wait!"

One of the prisoners broke the silence, and Bellatrix lowered her wand. The prisoner who had spoke was a younger man, barely a few years older than Draco himself. He stared up at the Death-Eaters with barely concealed terror.

"Please don't - "

The one whom Bellatrix had been torturing immediately let out a cry.

"Don't say anything! Don't - " but the words froze on his lips and his eyes went unblinking as the Dark Lord shot the killing curse at him.

The place was deathly silent as the Dark Lord looked directly at the other prisoner with his cold, calculating eyes.

"Proceed."

The man kept silent. A nod from the Dark Lord made Bellatrix lift her wand again, aiming it at him this time.

"Crucio."

He screamed as the curse hit him and broke immediately. "We - we were going to join the Order," the man gasped. "Neville Longbottom has been recruiting."

Draco froze.

And the silence that followed was terrifying.

"The Order has not been active ever since the war has begun," the Dark Lord said at last, his eyes narrowing into slits, but there was a hint of uncertainty in his voice. He turned to Draco, who tried to

look startled. "Draco?"

"This is the first time I'm hearing about it, my lord."

"Bellatrix?" The Dark Lord looked over at the witch, who seemed equally as confused. So did the other Death-Eaters. So he looked back at the prisoner. "Is there anything else?"

"Promise you'll let us go if I tell you."

The Dark Lord laughed. It was a distorted, eerie sound that made a shiver gloss down Draco's spine. "Bellatrix?"

Bellatrix smirked and hurled another Cruciatus at the man. And mere seconds later, he was coughing up blood, holding up a hand as a signal for Bellatrix to stop. "They're - they're at the Forbidden Forest."

Draco's jaw clenched at his revelation. He wanted to kill the man for breaking so easily and for letting the Dark Lord know what he had spent three years trying to so hard to conceal.

"They have two other camps," the man hastily added, Draco all the while screaming at him silently - stop talking, stop talking, stop talking. "But we don't know where they're located at."

The Dark Lord nodded faintly, glancing over his shoulder at Dolohov. "Take the other prisoners away. The rest of you - follow me, we have certain things to discuss. And Draco?"

"My lord?"

"Dispose of our informant."

The man visibly paled and flew into a

frenzy of begging and pleading for his life as the Dark Lord turned to leave. Draco waited until Dolohov had taken the other prisoners away and the rest of the Death-Eaters had left. His mind momentarily drifted to Hermione, and he remembered how he had seen Bellatrix torture her a long time ago. Hermione had kept her mouth shut through it all.

And just like that, Draco saw red.

It wasn't the most righteous sort of rage, because Draco subconsciously knew that he himself was a coward. He'd always been one. But it made him furious that all of his, Blaise's, Pansy's and Theo's work had been for nothing. All smashed into fragments, just like that. It was their one job, their one job - to keep the Dark

Lord from knowing about the Order. And this man had just given it away so easily. So when it was just the two of them - just him and the traitor, Draco leaned down and gripped the man by the neckline of his shirt. "What the fuck was that?" Draco hissed furiously, keeping his voice low enough for only the man to hear. "You couldn't have kept your mouth shut through two Crucios?"

"I-I - "

The man seemed incapable of speaking coherently through his tears, and Draco flung him away. "You disgust me," Draco spat, before standing up. He used a quick Legilimency on the man and found that he had, indeed, been telling the truth - Neville Longbottom was recruiting for

the Order.

The Order was finally rising up from the ashes again and the Dark Lord was going to destroy it before anything could happen. Just that thought alone made Draco livid enough to kill. And so he did.

Draco returned in a volatile mood that night. He didn't acknowledge the other three Slytherins in the living room.

Instead, he strode quickly to his own room, slamming the door shut behind him.

Hermione glanced up from the book she was reading, but one look at the thunderous look on Draco's face and her smile faded. "Draco, what's wrong?"

"Just give me a minute, Granger," he returned shortly, and grabbed the telephone on the bedside table, dragging it towards the bathroom. Once inside, he sealed the door shut with locks and silencing charms, before punching in Andromeda's number.

After three rings, she picked up. "Password, please?"

"Dromeda, it's me."

"Draco?" She seemed pleasantly

surprised. "How are - "

He hastily cut in before she could speak any further. "Dromeda, there's no time for niceties. The Dark Lord knows about the Order."

There was a gasp on her end, but she recovered fairly quickly. "How?"

"One of the bloody prisoners told him. The Dark Lord also knows about Neville and how he's recruiting. Did you know anything about that?"

"Not at all," he could hear her startled voice on the other end. "I thought the Order was just trying to help people, I didn't know they were planning on actually fighting."

This wasn't a surprise to Draco. Andromeda didn't know much and she

was just as much a middleman in this as he was. They were all playing such a dangerous game here, never knowing when everything could explode in their faces.

And now Hermione was involved. Draco couldn't think of a worst time to involve her like the present.

He gripped the phone tighter. "The Dark Lord is planning on launching an attack on any of the bases. I don't know the exact details of it and it might not even involve me, so send word to the Order to keep their eyes peeled at all times."

"I'll do what I can, Draco."

"And another thing," Draco shut his eyes briefly, wondering if he was going bloody mad for even entertaining this

idea. But it had slipped into his mind when Hermione had asked to fight alongside them, and he couldn't quite shake it ever since.

"Do you know where Hermione's wand is?"

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e v a n e s c o

Vanishes things.

Hermione paced outside the bathroom, her hands twisting nervously as she worried about Draco. She hadn't seen him this worked up since that one time when she found him in the bathroom with the broken glass, and she was worried that he'd be equally as wrecked as he was that night.

After what seemed like forever, the door

opened with a click and Draco stepped out with the telephone in his hands. His face was impassive as he regarded her, but his posture was rigid. "What're you doing, Granger?"

"I-I was worried about you," Hermione confessed honestly. She followed him as he went back to the bedside table to set the phone down, before shrugging out of his suit jacket. "Is everything alright?"

She reached out to touch his arm but he flinched away as though she was an open flame. "Don't," his voice was a low, strangled sound that made a shiver gloss her spine. His silver eyes met hers. "I - " he trailed off, unable to say anymore and showed her his hands instead.

There was no mistaking the rust-

coloured stains that tainted his pale skin. Hermione briefly wondered whose blood it was, then realised that she just needed to be grateful that it wasn't his. She reached over to the table for her wand and held it over his hands, remembering a spell that Blaise had taught her several days ago.

"Scourgify."

The stains vanished from his hands and she took a step forward, but he fended her away. "It's not enough, I just - " he swallowed. "I just need to fucking get it all off."

But the resignation in his voice was clear as crystal and Hermione knew what he really meant. That some bloodstains were too permanent to ever

be scrubbed clean or Scourgified away. They were just as permanent as her own scars and Hermione thought that in that sense, she could understand how Draco felt. She wanted her own scars gone just as much as he wanted the blood gone.

So Hermione didn't stop him this time. She watched silently as Draco retrieved a fresh set of clothes from the closet and headed for the bathroom. It took him a good fifteen minutes before he emerged and he frowned when he saw her sitting in his chair.

"Granger - "

"You need the bed - more than I do tonight," Hermione told him quickly, before he could say anything else. She went over to him, tugging on his arm

when he refused to budge and pulling him over to the bed.

"For fuck's sake, Granger - "

"I'll be fine," she shushed him. He was surprisingly compliant despite his verbal protests, and he let her push him down onto the bed, watching her with an inexplicable gaze as she drew the covers over him gently.

She couldn't help but brush his hair out of his eyes with a few delicate fingers, before letting her palm rest softly against his cheek. "I'll get a sleeping draught from the kitchen."

She began to pull away, but his fingers flew up to latch around her wrist, holding her hand still against his cheek before she could. "Don't go," he

murmured, and there was a sliver of vulnerability as he stared up at her that made her chest tighten painfully.

Merlin, there were times when she forgot that he was just twenty-one. And that the war had made him just as lost and vulnerable as she was.

"Of course," she whispered, and leaned forward to press her lips gently against his forehead. Then she pulled back, settling down in his chair and holding his hand tightly, glad that she could be the stronger one for once.

"Goodnight, Draco."

Draco awoke to the sounds of arbitrary

explosions - not the loud, devastating kind, but more along the lines of some objects being blasted to bits.

"She takes a swing," he heard a familiar voice say from outside. Theo. "And will he hit it...? Yes! He hits it!"

Theo's laughter was mingled with another feminine one that sounded remarkably like Hermione's. And, after a brief glance over at his empty chair, Draco realised that it was indeed Hermione. Draco pushed himself up from the bed, running a distracted hand through his hair as he made his way out of the room.

His eyes widened when he saw that the furniture was all shifted to the corner, with Theo and Hermione standing on

opposite ends of the room. Hermione had a baseball bat in hand and a basket of apples by her feet, while Theo was holding out his wand. And the walls, floor and ceiling of the living room were stained with what seemed like apple bits.

"She's going to pitch again," Theo was saying, completely oblivious to Draco's presence. "And he's getting ready. Are you ready?" Theo asked Hermione, as she picked up another apple.

Hermione smiled and swung the bat backwards. "Ready."

In spite of himself, Draco couldn't help but be amused by Hermione's enthusiasm. He had no idea what the hell they were doing, but this was one of the

rare few times he'd seen her so excited about something.

Theo held out his wand. "Okay, pitch it." Hermione threw up the apple and took a swing at it in mid-air. A flash of light streaked out from Theo's wand, one that Draco immediately deduced was the Knockback jinx, presumably to blow the apple to bits.

Quick as thought, Draco held out his hand and summoned the apple silently to him, smirking when both Theo and Hermione looked visibly surprised and confused. Then they turned to him simultaneously, Hermione smiling wider when she saw him, while Theo looked sheepish.

"What the hell are you two doing?"

Draco asked dryly, taking a generous bite out of the apple. He tried to ignore the fact that his heart practically raced as Hermione walked over to him quickly, wrapping her arms around his waist in a brief hug before pulling back, her eyes bright and happy.

Theo shrugged. "I'm teaching her the Knockback jinx."

"By trashing the room?"

"Blaise'll clean it."

"No," Draco gave him a flat look. Blaise was the responsible one while Theo was often known for making horrible messes, but Draco wasn't going to let Blaise clean up after Theo all the time. "You're going to clean it."

Theo gave a loud, dramatic groan. "Aw,

don't piss on my parade, mate. I was just teaching Hermione how to fight now that she's a part of 17-65."

Draco mentally berated himself for not having thought of this earlier. He was just so concerned for Hermione's safety that he hadn't even thought of letting her into any fights. And Theo, who was generally the most oblivious of the lot, had actually thought of preparing Hermione, just in case.

He glanced down at Hermione, who had now taken his half-eaten apple and taking small but hearty bites out of it. "How's it working out so far?"

Hermione let out a tiny but audible sigh. "I'm not so good at it."

"Not so good? Please. Red is shite at it,"

Theo said bluntly. Draco's eyebrows shot up at the nickname but pushed his curiosity aside to appease at a later date, and looked at Hermione, who hardly seemed offended by what Theo had said. "She can't even bring herself to hurt a fly."

"Why would I want to hurt a fly?" Hermione asked, looking quite appalled. "Because flies are annoying, they - "

"Shut up for a minute, Theo," Draco cut in, as a sudden idea came to him. He thought about the night he'd returned home with the sprained ankle, and the night he'd returned with a broken nose. He remembered the light in Hermione's eyes and the steadiness her hands and the alertness of her mind.

And everything fell into place.

Aware that Hermione and Theo were watching him with curious eyes, Draco crossed the room and plucked the wand neatly out of Theo's hand. Then he pointed it at his own arm, the one that didn't have the Dark Mark scarred on it, and cast a quick, half-hearted Stinging hex on his skin.

The pain that came was immediate and scorching, drowning out the horrified gasps that came from Theo and Hermione. But it wasn't something that Draco couldn't handle. This sort of pain was second nature - sometimes, physical pain was better than other kinds of pain - so he ignored it and turned to the matter at hand.

"Granger," he turned to Hermione, who was deathly pale and was already heading towards him. "Find your wand." He didn't have to ask twice. Hermione ran back into their room without a second thought. Theo took a step forward, prepared to heal the wound himself, but Draco stopped him.

"Teach her how to heal me," he told Theo calmly.

If Hermione Granger couldn't fight, then she sure as hell could heal. It made sense in a time like this, where fixing wounds was just as important as inflicting them, and perhaps even more important, because it was the only way they could stay alive to end the war.

Hermione was glad to hear Blaise and Pansy return some afternoons later. Theo and Draco were out on a mission and she had been worrying herself sick about them, so having Blaise and Pansy around as company was always a lovely distraction. She watched as the two Slytherins staggered into the kitchen with their arms full of paper bags, wanting to help but not certain if they'd let her.

"Hey, Hermione," Blaise spotted her peeking at them in the corner and smiled widely. Hermione shyly headed over to them, pausing uncertainly by the kitchen counter.

Pansy dropped the bags down on the

kitchen counter and drew out a parcel from one of the bags. "This came for you. We found it at the doorstep."

Hermione eagerly took it and smoothed out the wrapper, unaware of Blaise's and Pansy's curious gazes on her.

"Who's it from?" asked Blaise at last, when the curiosity was simply too much to bear. He'd never seen a package come for any of them and left at the doorstep before. It made him wonder if Hermione could secretly be in contact with one of her old friends.

"Oh," a tiny smile flitted across Hermione's face briefly as she hugged the parcel to her chest. "No one. It - it's nothing to worry about."

Then she disappeared back into Draco's

room again, leaving Pansy and Blaise staring after her, completely mystified. Pansy finally shook her head. "Am I the only one who's dying to use Legilimency on her again?"

Blaise chuckled as he rearranged the groceries on the shelves with his wand. "You and me both, baby."

Pansy watched him briefly for a few seconds, before her lips curled in an impish grin. "You're going to be at home all day, right?" She asked, her voice dipping several notches into her signature, sultry one. Walking over to Blaise, she wrapped her arms around him from behind and pressed a quick kiss to the nape of his neck. "Because I can get Maisie to cover for me."

Blaise shot her an amused glance over his shoulder. "Sorry, baby, but I'm afraid I have to spend the rest of the afternoon with Hermione."

"I know I should be jealous when you say that, but frankly, the idea of you and Hermione going at it kind of turns me on."

"How about me, Hermione and Draco?"

"Even better," Pansy smirked wickedly.

"And Theo can be standing in the corner handing out mints or something."

Blaise snorted a laugh. He'd long since understood Pansy's odd kinks and found it nothing but entertaining, even back during their Hogwarts' days when they were just friends. "Actually, I'm supposed to be teaching Hermione how

to brew potions. Draco's orders."

Pansy rolled her eyes and let out a droll sigh. "Fine. I'll let Hermione know. I'll probably just get Maisie to cover for me anyway, it'll probably be fun to watch you two blow up the kitchen."

Blaise glared at her indignantly. "Two galleons says we wouldn't."

"Make it sexual favours and you're on, baby."

Yes, that sounded far better than some stupid money. "Deal."

Draco and Theo were on one of the most difficult missions they ever had to undertake and the funny thing was that it

wasn't even for the Dark Lord. In fact, it was just for Hermione Granger. After Andromeda had told Draco about the whereabouts of Hermione's wand, Draco had taken it upon himself to get it back for her.

And Theo, like the insatiable git that he was, decided it was going to be fun to tag along.

So the two ventured into one of the makeshift bases belonging to the Order, and had placed themselves under disillusionment charms just in case. But three minutes in the base and Draco was fast realising that there was no need to. The place was pathetically dilapidated and empty, save for a house-elf they saw in one of the rooms and a hospital wing

with six injured people.

And this was what the Order thought could end the fucking war?

Draco almost smirked with bitterness. He sure as hell hoped that the other bases were in far better shape.

"Hey," the wary surprise in Theo's voice made Draco stiffen abruptly. Theo pulled Draco to a halt just before they rounded the next corner. "Isn't that one of the new initiates?"

Draco's eyes scanned the surroundings briefly, before landing on a sole figure lurking in the corridor a good distance away. Immediately, Draco knew who he was - Johnny Martins, one of the new Death-Eaters that had just joined the Dark Lord's inner circle.

"What's he doing here?" Theo asked quietly.

Draco didn't know. But he did know that Johnny Martins was either a traitor to the Dark Lord or to the Order and he was going to find out which. "You go find Hermione's wand," he directed Theo, "it's somewhere in the basement. I'll trail Martins."

"Got it. By the way, can the wand be my gift to Hermione for that stupid Christmas thing we're celebrating?"

Draco automatically scowled; glad that Theo couldn't see him because of the Disillusionment charm. He'd risked practically everything to retrieve Hermione's wand just so he could give it back to her for Christmas, and now Theo

was going to take credit for it.

"Fine," Draco growled at last, deciding that he'd probably have to think of something else, something better to give Hermione, and that was unlikely because the wand was about the best thing he could think of. "I'll meet you at the back door in five minutes, come find me here if I'm not there. Be careful and don't fucking die."

"Always so optimistic," Theo deadpanned, before heading off in the opposite direction.

Once Draco had made sure that no one else was nearby, he began to trail after Johnny, frowning when he saw the Death-Eater slip into one of the corner rooms in the east wing. It was a room

that was intricately sealed with magical locks, and Draco watched as Johnny undid them one by one before heading inside.

Johnny emerged several minutes later; a thick, brown-coloured fabric tucked neatly under his arm. Draco trailed Johnny as he headed back down the corridor again and down the stairwell. It wasn't until Johnny reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a Portkey that Draco stepped out of the shadows and removed the disillusionment charm on himself, realising that this was the most opportune moment to catch Johnny before he portkeyed the hell out of there. The moment Johnny saw Draco, he froze and visibly paled. His grip loosened on

the Portkey and Draco immediately took the opportunity to snatch it out of Johnny's grasp.

"Didn't expect to see you here, Martins," Draco began conversationally, ignoring the way the other Death-Eater looked shiftily around. "So why're you here?"

Johnny glared, holding out his wand protectively in front of him. "None of your business, Malfoy."

"So you're not going to tell me?"

Johnny aimed his wand to kill, but Draco knew what spell was coming out of it before he even opened his mouth.

"Avada - "

"Too fucking slow," Draco hit him with a silencing charm, followed by a quick body-binding curse. "Fine. I'll find out

myself."

Johnny was frozen in spot as Draco used Legilimency on him. There were times when Draco hated this spell more than any other. Because there was something lethal about knowing, something effectively toxic about it that obliterated ignorance and naïveté. And at a time like this, when all everyone heard about was either danger or death, sometimes ignorance was bliss. Draco, unfortunately, could never have that.

So when he had finally viewed Johnny's memories, Draco fell a step back. He tugged the cloth firmly away from Johnny's grasp and lowered the wand from Johnny's forehead to just above his heart.

"Really sorry it has to end this way, Martins," Draco said calmly. He swore he could almost see the flicker of sheer terror in Johnny's frozen eyes. Just another shade of terror that would haunt him for the rest of his life. "Avada Kedavra."

In many ways, Hermione still couldn't wrap her head around the fact that her one-time enemies were now her closest friends, and that they were the only ones who had done their utmost to help her. Blaise had spent the entire afternoon teaching her how to brew potions, and she was glad that Draco had realised she

was more suited to healing than fighting. It was a war but, well, Hermione often felt like all the fight had gone out of her. "I think I know why you feel this way, Red," Blaise said, when Hermione had revealed why she didn't feel much like fighting anymore. Both he and Pansy had adopted Theo's nickname for her and were now comfortably calling her that every so often.

"It's because you don't remember how it was like before the war," Blaise continued, when Hermione turned curious eyes on him. "You don't remember your days at Hogwarts or your life before that. And you can't reminisce or wish for something that you no longer remember."

"Actually, that makes a lot of sense," Pansy added, after frowning thoughtfully for awhile. She had been watching them from her perch on the counter, more than contented to stay away from the potions because she claimed she didn't have a knack for making them. "Remembering how things were like before is the reason why Blaise and I want this war to end. We think of better times, of simpler times, of safer times. And we can't wait for things to go back to the way they used to be."

Hermione considered their words seriously for a moment or two. She thought that it truly was simpler for Theo, Blaise and Pansy - because it was just black and white for them. Things

were good before, now they were bad; and when the war ended, things would go back to being good again.

She wondered if it was this clear cut for herself and Draco. For her, things were non-existent before, now they existed; and when the war ended - what then? And for Draco - she wondered if perhaps the end of this war was the start of another one for him.

But Hermione was abruptly drawn away from her thoughts when the front door opened. She felt her heart stutter in relief when she saw Theo and Draco enter, the latter of which had a bundle of fabric in his hands.

Setting her spare wand down on the table, she immediately went over to

Draco. She'd barely reached out for him when he held out a hand briefly to stop her, in the same way he'd done just the night before. "Don't," she remembered him saying, "I've got too much blood on my hands."

"Draco," she breathed now, staring up at him worriedly. "Is everything okay?"

His gaze locked on hers. Hermione was aware of Blaise and Pansy sidling up next to Theo, matching looks of confusion on all three of their faces. Not directed at her, but at Draco, whose posture was rigid and seemed like he had something to say.

He glanced round at the other four, before shaking out the fabric in his hands. And Hermione found the oxygen

leave her lungs when she realised that it wasn't just a simple piece of cloth.

It was a cloak.

And Draco confirmed her thoughts mere seconds later, when he placed his hand underneath the cloak and his hand vanished, amidst the startled looks from Hermione and the other Slytherins.

Draco couldn't help but smirk briefly, in spite of the sombre mood all round. "I guess I found one of the Deathly Hallows."

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"Best. Christmas. Present. Ever," were the first words to break the silence in the wake of Draco's announcement. They came from Theo, who stared at the cloak with gleaming eyes. "Can I borrow it?" Draco shot him a flat look, quickly deducing what was on Theo's mind. Theo wasn't too difficult to read, and Legilimency was honestly redundant on

him. "You're not going to use it for shagging purposes."

Theo's mouth dropped in dramatic indignation. "I wasn't going to - "

"You're not going to use it to watch people shag either."

Now Theo scowled. "Killjoy."

Draco opened his mouth to retort, but a tiny laugh from Hermione made him glance over at her. His eyes softened as he took the expression on her face in - the light on her face and the gentle curve of her lips. Merlin, he'd almost forgotten how beautiful her smile was.

"Oh, I see what this is," Theo's eyes flickered between Draco and Hermione, an impish grin spreading across his face. "You're going to use it, aren't you?"

You're going to shag under it and that's why I can't have it!"

Hermione blushed rapidly, while Draco shot Theo a deadly look. "No one is shagging under it because it belongs to Harry fucking Potter."

There was a startled pause.

And then Blaise broke in with, "I see. So you're thinking that if you shag under it then maybe saint Potter wouldn't want it back and you'll get to keep it. Brilliant idea, Draco, just brilliant."

Actually, that was a brilliant idea - not the shagging bit (okay, maybe the shagging bit too, Draco would be lying if he claimed that thought hadn't crossed his mind the moment he saw the Cloak of Invisibility) - but the idea that they'd get

to keep the Cloak for future missions. It'd certainly work better than the disillusionment charm for hiding purposes.

Well, and shagging purposes too.

Draco almost scowled as he thought of that. Fucking Zabini had put the idea into his head and now he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Shooting a brief glance at Hermione, whose cheeks were still crimson - was she thinking of something along the same lines too? - Draco firmly shoved all awry thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on the matter at hand instead.

"You remember Johnny Martins?" He said, directing the question to the three

Slytherins. "Fresh initiate, always with Guthrie and the other Death-Eaters - " They nodded and he continued, "apparently, he's been a member of the Order for the past year, only to have defected to the Dark Lord's side three months ago. Since then, he's been working under MacNair's orders. Stealing the Cloak of Invisibility from saint Potter was just one of his many jobs."

"Wait," Blaise cut in, realisation rapidly dawning on his face. "So MacNair's part of the Peverells too?"

"It's unconfirmed," Draco acceded. "But it seems fairly likely - that he'd ask Martins to locate one of the Deathly Hallows. Parkinson," he turned to Pansy,

who immediately straightened. "Get a phial. You can all view Martins' memories whenever."

Pansy disappeared into the room on the right without another word. Blaise and Theo quickly seized the opportunity to snatch the Cloak from Draco and the two were soon trying to conceal various parts of their body just for the fun of it.

Draco watched in morbid fascination as Theo's head floated in mid-air, but a sudden tug from Hermione made him glance down at the girl. She looked anxious, her fingers grasping nervously on the sleeve of his suit. He quickly led her away back to their room, closing the door behind them.

"What's wrong, Granger?" A sudden

thought struck him, and he gazed down at her, hardly able to hide the worry in his expression. "Do you remember Walden MacNair?"

"I'm afraid not," Hermione confessed, and her calm demeanour reaffirmed the fact that she didn't. She stared up at him, guilt swimming in her brown eyes. "Draco, was I the reason why MacNair knew where the Cloak was? I - I can't remember if I gave away any information, by accident - "

She began to stumble on her words and Draco hastened to ease her fears. "No, you didn't. Martins was a member of the Order, remember? And, apparently, quite a close one. He knew that Potter had the Cloak."

Hermione sighed in relief and took a step forward towards Draco, but he almost flinched away, but she caught his hands before he could. "Draco," she said softly. "You killed someone today, didn't you?"

Draco's jaw clenched, his gaze darkening. "I kill people almost everyday, Granger. It's not a big deal."

"You seem to think it is. So - who did you kill today?" He kept silent, and she suddenly knew. "Oh."

"There wasn't a fucking choice, Granger," and there was a desperate plea in his voice, like he was begging her to understand. "He knew too much, and if I sent him back, MacNair would be suspicious. Erasing his memories

wouldn't work either, because he'd still have to continue being a Death-Eater with that Mark on his arm and MacNair would just find out sooner or later, it's just - "

"It's okay, Draco - I mean, it's not okay to kill," Hermione hastened to correct herself, and Draco's lips quirked up in a wry grin at that. She sounded so much like her old self for awhile.

"You did what you had to do," and Hermione spoke slower now, like she was contemplating every word before she said it. "In a war like this - everything's blurred. There are people who do all the wrong things for all the right reasons."

She reached up to brush away a stray

lock of blond hair that had fallen into his eyes. Her palm lingered against his cheek and he automatically leaned into her touch. "And with such good intentions - I don't think you can be entirely bad, Draco."

Hermione was the first one up on Christmas morning. Draco had been the one to teach her how to cast a muffling charm just several days ago, and she picked up her wand to cast one on him now.

After her bath, she changed into a sweater that was not Draco's this time, but hers, and went over to Draco's

impressive bookshelf. She located the boxes she'd stored just behind a huge stack of encyclopaedias, and toted them out into the living room. Hermione thought that the Christmas tree had never looked prettier before despite having spent many an afternoon gazing at it. Maybe it was just the festive spirit that was getting to her.

She smiled to herself and began to rearrange the boxes under the Christmas tree. She wasn't surprised to see that there weren't any presents under it - Draco had told her that they never celebrated Christmas, not since the war began anyway - and apart from Blaise and herself, the others didn't seem particularly enthusiastic about the

holiday.

When she was done rearranging, she went into the kitchen and made her usual pot of tea. She had just taken a sip of her tea when one of the doors opened. Blaise stumbled into the kitchen moments later, looking rather surprised when he saw Hermione already up and about.

"Hey, Red," he greeted cheerfully, and went over to pour himself a mug from the pot Hermione had brewed. "Didn't expect to see you up so early."

Hermione's cheeks tinted. "Uh, well - "

"You're excited for today, I get it. Merry Christmas, by the way. You're probably not going to be hearing this from any of the others but me."

She chuckled and smiled at him warmly. "Merry Christmas to you too," she set her mug down and stood up. "I - I have a present for you."

Blaise's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

"Yeah." Hermione went to the Christmas tree and grabbed one of the boxes that had Blaise's name labelled on it. She handed it to Blaise, who seemed genuinely excited to receive it. "Um, it's not much, but it's one of the few things I still remember how to do," she told him, when he opened the box and found a knitted green sweater.

Blaise looked at her in surprise. "Merlin, did you make this?"

"Well - yes. They're all in different shades of green. Mine's mint, yours is in

emerald, Pansy's is in teal and Theo's is in viridian. Do you like it?"

"Of course I do," he didn't miss a beat, and Hermione's smile widened when he immediately began to pull it on. "Red, this is the first present I've gotten since the war began. Liking it is an understatement."

"This is your first present?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's a war, and the four of us are standing in the frontlines; so it kind of seems pointless to celebrate birthdays and Christmas and such when being alive everyday is already a bloody miracle. At least - that's the way Pansy and Theo see it. Frankly, I'd kill for presents every now and then," he added, with a wink.

Hermione mulled his words over. She thought that in some sense, she was rather similar to Blaise. They'd both seen the worst of the war, but it hadn't completely killed the optimism in them. "What about Draco?"

"Draco? He just stays away from everything fun or merry in general. I know he thinks he's done too many bad things to enjoy something as pure as Christmas, so he doesn't let himself celebrate it."

"Oh."

"Cheer up, Red. Even if Draco doesn't celebrate it, it doesn't mean the rest of us aren't going to. I've got a present for you too."

Hermione quite thought she'd misheard.

"What?"

"Yeah. Just let me get Pansy - it's a joint gift from the both of us." Blaise got up and headed back into his room, just as Theo emerged from his, with an annoyed scowl on his face. He wandered into the living room, settling down onto the sofa and stretching lazily.

"For Salazar's sake, what the hell was all that noise? Were you two singing Christmas carols outside or something?"

Hermione smiled. "Do you want us to?"

"Fuck no. By the way, Red, your present's hanging on the bloody tree."

Hermione's eyes widened and she immediately leapt up. "Where is it?"

"I just told you, Red. Search for it yourself, it'll be like a stupid Easter egg

hunt - which, by the way, we will not be celebrating when April comes."

A tiny smile curved on her lips when Theo spoke about April. She was often uncertain about the future, but if Theo saw her staying with them for many more months, she was definitely fine with that. This apartment had become her safe haven, and a part of her never wanted to leave. She never wanted any of them to leave.

She stood up and began searching for the present that Theo had hung on the tree. It didn't take long. Mere seconds later, she found a wand tied by a tiny string to one of the branches. She glanced over at Theo, who simply smirked.

"It's yours, Red."

Hermione froze. "My wand?"

"Yeah. I got it back for you from the Order - well, technically, Draco and I went together, but I'd like to take full credit for it, because I'm the one who found it. And - I swear, Red, you better not be crying - "

"I'm not!" But she was well into a bout of sniffles and Theo looked at her strangely. "I just - " She stared at him and realised that she had never once been wrong about them. Any of them. They were Death-Eaters, but how could they be bad when they had done nothing but good things for her? "Thank you, Theo."

"Don't fucking hug me or anything," he warned her warily. "And stop crying."

Hermione managed a weak laugh. She was still brushing errant tears away when one of the doors clicked open and a familiar, feminine voice cut in. "Theodore Nott, why're you making Red cry on Christmas morning?" Pansy stood by the doorway of the room, her hair ruffled and features laced with annoyance as she scowled at Theo.

"I didn't make her cry. I just gave her a present and she began sobbing."

Hermione choked out an amused laugh.

"Well, then, prepare to weep because Blaise and I have got the best present for you," Pansy declared. She and Blaise went over to where Hermione was, and set down a chest on the floor. "Open it." And so Hermione did; flipping the

catches on the chest and finding a whole inventory inside. There were phials of medicine and healing potions labelled neatly, a stack of books on one end along with a cloth folded neatly in the other. It seemed far too much to fit into a single chest, and Hermione couldn't help but just stare at the vast collection of it.

"Most of these used to be mine," Blaise said, a smile curving on his face as he watched Hermione's expression closely. "Well - it was a lot simpler than that. Pansy and I went to the black market the other day to refill the stockpile and get some other things. We cast an undetectable extension charm on it so it can store far more than its original capacity. This chest now has every

healing potion you'll ever need in the phials, and every spell you'll ever need to know in those books."

"Yes, and one more thing," Pansy added, reaching for the cloth and shaking it out. Hermione's eyes widened when she recognised what it was. "Draco thought it was a good idea that you should be the one to have it. After all, Potter's your best friend and the Cloak would keep you safe."

"You're now our official healer," Blaise finished, with a grin.

Hermione was silent for a long moment. She thought of what Pansy had said about Potter being her best friend, and realised that Pansy couldn't be further from the truth. Because maybe Harry

Potter was one of the closest people to her a long time ago, but the war had changed so much. And now she knew without a doubt that the three Slytherins in the living room and the fourth in the bedroom were the only people she knew and loved more than the world.

"You're going to cry again, aren't you?"

Theo's sardonic question made Hermione laugh, even has tears pricked her eyes again. "I'm not. I - I just don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing," Pansy grinned, before settling down on the floor next to Hermione and staring at the presents under the Christmas tree. "So - which one of the boxes belongs to me?"

"Wait." Theo got up now, quickly

heading over to Hermione. "We've got presents too?"

He sounded so shocked that Hermione began to wonder if it was the best idea after all. "Do you not want presents...?"

"No, you can't take it back," Theo returned quickly, and promptly found his box under the tree. He opened it with the kind of impatience akin to a little child, which Hermione found thoroughly endearing. And when he found the jumper, she thought that maybe Theodore Nott secretly liked Christmas after all.

She watched the pleased look on Theo's face and the thrilled one on Pansy's when she opened her box, and wondered if maybe not celebrating Christmas had nothing to do with them being Death-

Eaters or the war, and everything instead to do with Draco.

It did have everything to do with Draco, as Hermione soon found out later that day. She'd spent all morning playing that game Theo had invented with apples, a baseball bat and the Knockback jinx. Pansy and Blaise had joined just for fun, even though the latter was appalled to see the mess they'd made afterwards.

Draco didn't leave the room.

And when he didn't even come out for lunch, Hermione went back inside because, well, it just wasn't the same without him. It was a form of attachment

she knew wasn't wise to have at a time like this, but then again, he was all she had.

She found him in his usual chair, his legs hanging off one arm of the seat and his back resting against the other side. He was deep in concentration as he read, a tiny frown glossing his forehead every now and then, but glanced up when she entered. "Granger."

"Hey," she went over to him worriedly. "Why didn't you come outside?"

He shrugged. "I fucking hate Christmas, Granger, you know that."

"Yes - I gathered," she smiled and shook her head fondly at him. Then she remembered the presents she'd made for him still tucked away, and quickly went

to the bookshelf to retrieve it.

Draco watched her for a moment; an internal debate ensuing in his mind before he finally gave in. "Christmas reminds me of my parents," he said flatly, his voice carefully devoid of any emotion. "We used to celebrate it - but now they're gone."

"Not quite," Hermione's voice was muffled as she rummaged through the books.

"What?"

She fished out two boxes and glanced over at him. Her eyes were bright and soft at the same time, the smile on her face hesitant but hopeful. "You'll see," she said vaguely, and held out the boxes for him to take. "Open them."

His eyebrows shot up. But he didn't question her motive, and took the boxes from her. She couldn't help but feel impatient as he opened them slowly. And after he fidgeted with the box a little longer - she was certain he was doing this on purpose - she reached over and grabbed the first box away from him before opening it.

"It's a sweater," Hermione shook out the midnight-green fabric and handed it to him. She wanted to tell him that the colour suited him best - because if she was light then he was darkness, but light was only often appreciated because of the dark, and so she was nothing without him. She wished she could say it all, but words didn't come easy to her anymore.

"I hope you like it," she said instead.

A tiny smirk curled on his lips as he stared down at it, smoothing his hands over the fabric in a somewhat careful manner, like he was afraid to ruin it.

"Dromeda sent the wool, didn't she?"

Hermione blushed. "You knew?"

"An unlabelled parcel sent to our doorstep addressed to you. Doesn't take a genius to find out."

"I called her about it. I wanted to go to the Black Market, but - I don't think I'm ready to go out just yet."

Draco stared at her for a moment or two, before glancing away. "Take your time, Granger," he told her, as he fiddled with the other box. Hermione let him open it himself this time round, picking

anxiously at a stray thread on her sweater as he lifted a brand new phial from the box. He threw a confused glance at her and she smiled.

"It's my memory - of your mother."

He froze. "What?"

"I remembered some time ago. It's just a fleeting memory, but I asked Pansy to extract it and - and store it up for you. Just in case I forget again." She shifted closer to the edge of the bed. "Do you want to view it? Pansy says we can use the pensieve - "

"No," Draco returned quickly. He couldn't quite meet her eyes, instead staring fixedly at the phial. "I'll see it some other time." There was a pause, and then he glanced briefly over at her.

"Presents on the bed are for you, by the way."

"Who's it from?"

"Me."

"You?" Hermione stared at him in astonishment, but she immediately reached for the gifts. "But you hate Christmas."

"Yes, but you don't."

"Oh." She eagerly opened the boxes, a smile curving her face when she saw a phial in one of the boxes as well. Lifting the chain off her neck, she promptly hung the new one with the one that Draco had given her before. "Whose memory is this?"

"Everyone's."

She stared at him in confusion.

"The four of us wear phials that contain our own memories," he explained, dragging out his chain and showing her the two phials that hung at the bottom, "so it's time you had one. And since you don't remember much, I put together a collection of memories the four of us - and Dromeda - have of you. And it's - Granger, don't you dare cry," he warned, when started to sniff. "I heard you earlier when the others gave you their presents and you've already maxed out your bloody crying quota for today."

Hermione laughed, in spite of herself, and grasp the new phial firmly between her fingers. "Thank you, Draco."

"Don't thank me. Just open the other one."

She chuckled again, brushing her eyes quickly with the back of her hand, before opening the other box. Her eyes widened when she saw a stack of books from authors whose names she distantly remembered. Tolkien. Austen. Dickens. And then her heart stuttered as she realised what they were. "You got me muggle books?"

His lips curled up in a brief smirk.

"I thought you hated muggles. You've always believed that they - we - are inferior."

He didn't miss the way her eyes flickered down to the scar on her arm. She was close enough for him to reach over to trace the mark Bellatrix had branded her with, and so he did.

"Everything's blurred, Granger," he murmured, at last, reminding her of what she'd said some nights ago. "Ever since the bloody war began, I'm not too sure what I believe in anymore - this," he brushed his thumb gently over her skin, before dragging up the sleeve of his own jumper. His Dark Mark was as visible and abhorrent as ever. "Or this."

Hermione didn't know what made her act on impulse. Maybe it was the hesitance in his silver eyes, or the fact that she felt the dire need to reassure him. But she didn't think twice when she leaned up, holding his face gently between her hands and pressed her lips to his.

Draco froze against her, but she kissed him soundly, throwing aside her nerves

and inhibitions for just a moment. And as his eyes fell shut and his heart began to pound, he realised somewhere in the back of his mind that Hermione Granger kissed like nothing else mattered but him.

Not the war, or the blood, or the destruction - just him, like he'd hung the moon and painted the stars and he was her world and everything in between.

So he kissed her back, because it was the only thing that made perfect sense. She was inexperienced as ever, and so he reached up and threaded his fingers gently through her curls, angling her head so he could deepen the kiss. His tongue gently prodded her lips open and he swallowed the sigh that left her and

swept into his mouth. She tasted of peppermint and chocolate and something else utterly addictive that was just purely her, and he felt his stomach tighten deliciously when she sighed his name against his lips.

It was enough to remind him that this was wrong, and so he drew back slowly, guiltily stealing another kiss from her lips before pulling away completely. She gazed up at him with heavy-lids and glazed eyes and Merlin, he fucking wanted her, all of her.

But he couldn't have her.

She smiled softly at him, a light of understanding in her eyes despite the fact that he'd remained silent, and reached up to brush her thumb against his cheek.

"Merry Christmas, Draco."

He surprised her with a smile, because it was the first of its kind. He'd smirked plenty, but never had she seen him let his guard down before. "Merry Christmas, Granger."

"Hermione."

"Merry Christmas, Hermione."

22 | bombard

2 2

b o m b a r d a

Provokes an explosion.

New Year's Eve was a far more subdued event. Blaise had suggested celebrating it, but his idea was quick shot down by the other three Slytherins.

"It's kind of pointless," Theo had said, when Blaise asked for a reason. "I mean,

all it does is to remind us that one more year has come and gone, and we're still fighting a war that never seems to end."

His words were met with resigned silence from the others. Hermione couldn't help but acknowledge that Theo was right - as pessimistic as it sounded. It didn't make much of a difference to her, because she'd been in captivity for so long that she found herself rather detached from the whole idea of war. But she supposed that for the four of them, who seemed to fight harder than anyone, it was a disappointment to wake up everyday and realised that the war was not yet over.

Nevertheless, she thought that they still could use some holiday merriment, and

so she offered to help Blaise in the kitchen that New Year's Eve. She wasn't as proficient at cooking as he was, of course, but she knew the bare basics.

"I think it's good to have you, Red," Blaise mused, while they were preparing the food. "My mood gets dragged down by the other three and it's hard to stay hopeful sometimes."

Hermione looked up at him. "Well - I think hope is very much necessary at a time like this - just as much as bravery is."

Blaise let out a slight chuckle at that. "Don't tell Draco or Theo what you just said. They'd rather kill themselves than admit that what they have is a form of Gryffindor courage rather than Slytherin

cowardice."

The two laughed for a moment and continued to work in silence for awhile, until the tray of food was finally done. Blaise picked up his wand, gesturing for Hermione to do the same. "Okay, you try it this time. Ready?"

Hermione nodded uncertainly as she tried to remember what he'd taught her earlier. He smiled brightly at her and gestured towards the fireplace. "Go ahead."

She took a deep breath and gripped her wand tight.

"Incendio."

"Okay, Theo, I have to ask - food or sex?"

Theo grinned and leaned back in his chair. He'd just had his third helping of roast ham to go with the heap of food on his plate, so he wasn't surprised when Pansy finally asked that question. "I don't know," he answered truthfully, before turning to his best mate next to him.

"Draco?"

Draco didn't even spare him a glance.

"Food."

"Really?"

"I need food to fucking live, don't I?"

"Well, logically, that's the right way to look at it," Theo acceded. "But let's just

say that you can go the rest of your life with either food or sex - which will it be?"

"Food."

"Really?" Theo's lips tugged upwards in a sly smile that almost mirrored Pansy's opposite him. "So let's say a really, really attractive brunette - " and now Theo looked pointedly at Hermione, who was in the kitchen with Blaise, " - threw herself at you and you'd still pick food?"

"Food," but neither Pansy nor Theo missed the way Draco's eyes flickered to Hermione for a brief moment.

Theo chuckled. It was a good thing that Hermione was busy preparing the pudding and couldn't hear the

conversation they'd just had. He was certain her blush would be off the charts. Theo had just started on the new portion of ham when the skin on his arm suddenly erupted with a slow, familiar burn. He stilled, a slice of ham still hanging off his fork, and glanced over at Draco with wide eyes and a sinking heart. Pansy too looked worried, and Blaise was heading out of the kitchen towards them with Hermione in tow.

Only Draco looked calm as ever, but Theo swore he could see the sliver of fear in Draco's eyes. Or maybe he wasn't the only one who saw it - maybe Hermione noticed it too, if the way her eyes darted towards Draco and stayed fixed on him was any indication.

"Draco?" Blaise was the first to break the silence. "Is it - "

"Yes," Draco's jaw was clenched, and he jerked his head in the direction of their Death-Eater robes hanging on the coat rack. "Go. Now."

The other three needed no further encouragement. They immediately went over to grab their robes and masks, before apparating to the Malfoy Manor. But Draco lingered, if only to cast a reassuring look at Hermione.

"We'll be fine, Granger."

She smiled faintly and closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He thought about it. "Get the potions

ready. We'll probably be pretty cut up when we get back. And save Theo's food for him, he'll probably be starving as usual."

She nodded and looked up at him, reaching up to brush the pads of her thumbs gently against his cheeks. "Stay safe, Draco."

"Not likely. It's an occupational hazard," Draco smirked briefly, feeling the knot in his stomach dissipate when Hermione let out a tiny laugh.

"Then just do whatever you can to come back."

And this was a promise he could make. "Always, Granger."

Draco had vaguely guessed that the Dark Lord was to launch a surprise attack on the Order. He'd expected Christmas - since the Dark Lord liked celebrating the fucking holidays in style, and death was the best way to go about it - but New Year's Eve was no surprise either.

But the mission was different this time round, because it wasn't about finding out as much information as they could. Instead, it was just about staying alive and taking as few lives as possible - the latter of which proved an almost impossible task since the Dark Lord himself was going to be present.

And so Draco found himself standing next to the Dark Lord a good distance away from the Order's headquarters. Behind them stood the other Death-Eaters whom Draco had picked out just a half hour ago. The three Lestranges were there this time - Bellatrix, Rodolphus and Rabastan - along with Guthrie Rhodes; all of whom Draco knew were top-notch fighters and would see to the success of their mission. Then there was Yaxley and MacNair, two members of the Peverells whom Draco was secretly hoping would get killed in the crossfire. Theo and Blaise were the last two, because Draco knew they could hold their own in a fight and watch his back.

He was actually more concerned about Pansy, who was undercover this time round. She was standing a good way behind them, placed under a disillusionment charm. Draco just hoped that the Dark Lord wouldn't actually detect her presence.

"My lord?" Bellatrix stepped up, taking her position on the other side of the Dark Lord. "We're ready."

The Dark Lord glanced over at Draco, who nodded silently. "Bring Harry Potter to me. I want him alive," the Dark Lord said, as he drew out the Elder wand from his cloak.

Draco watched him silently, his heart pounding because the second of the Deathly Hallows was close enough for

him to take. Did the Peverells know that their leader had one of the Deathly Hallows? Was that their final plan then, to usurp the Dark Lord and disarm him, after they'd located the other two Deathly Hallows?

Draco's mind raced, and he found himself momentarily left behind as the others apparated off towards the headquarters. But he took his time about it, knowing that Pansy was trailing him from behind, and he wanted to ensure that she entered the building the same time as he did.

When he finally reached the front door, he felt Pansy come up to him, her fingers brushing briefly against his by way of greeting. "Any last words of advice?"

She sounded torn between amusement and anxiety, and he knew she was more nervous than she let on.

"Yes," his voice was low and almost inaudible, loud enough only for her to hear. "Stay alive."

Hermione spent New Year's Eve alone. After the four Slytherins had left, she'd packed up the remaining food, washed all the dishes, and grabbed the box of potions that Blaise and Pansy had given her for Christmas. It didn't take long for her to lay out all the bottles on the

counter and when she was done, she counted down the hours to midnight.

And then it was New Year's, but the war was still raging on.

It wasn't until a good forty minutes later that Pansy suddenly apparated back into the apartment along with a heavily wounded girl. Pansy herself looked a little cut up, but the other girl was unconscious and bleeding terribly.

Hermione let out a horrified gasp at the sight. "What happened?"

"I accidentally splinched her," Pansy sounded frustrated, and she set the girl down gently onto the floor before running straight into the room where they stored the memory phials. "Draco told me that my task was to watch out for

him, and Blaise and Theo, just in case. But I thought it'd be clever to save members of the Order, and I tried it on her. Only I forgot that when you apparate two people there's always a risk of not doing it properly and she got splinched. I mean, apart from the fact that she was already hexed pretty badly."

"Who hexed her?"

"Draco, of course." Pansy came back out and saw the look of shock on Hermione's face. "Come on, Red, it's a war and the Dark Lord's leading this mission. Be thankful that Draco used a hex and not an Avada."

Hermione realised that Pansy was right. There was really no room for sentiment or mercy at a time like this. She went

over to the counter and handed Pansy a couple of numbing potions. "You might need this."

"Thanks." Pansy stuffed the potions in her bag along with the other empty memory phials she'd gotten, before picking up her wand again. She cast another swift glance at the girl on the floor. "Take care of her."

"I will. And please be safe, Pansy."

Pansy gave Hermione a quick hug. "We'll be fine," she assured her, before apparating out of the apartment altogether, leaving nothing but a dusty, bloodied silence behind.

Hermione's eyes drifted over to the girl on the floor. And then her instincts kicked in and she immediately began to

work. She remembered briefly how Blaise had taught her that Dittany worked best on splinched body parts. Draco had gotten a bottle of it from the Black Market awhile ago, and she used some of it now, after clearing away the blood with a quick Scourgify.

"You're going to be fine," Hermione whispered, when the girl let out a painful cry even in her state of unconsciousness. "You're safe now. Everything's okay."

Hermione soon realised that there was something easier about healing. It wasn't like fighting, where it sent fear rushing through her veins. It calmed her, because she'd spent so many years suffering that it was all she wanted to do to get better.

And now that she was better, it only made sense for her to want to help others feel better too.

It wasn't until Hermione had cleaned the blood off and eased the swelling on the girl's face when she suddenly realised exactly who this girl was. And she paused, her eyes widening as she took in the girl's familiar features - the blond hair and the fairy-like tilt of the girl's shut eyelids.

The memory was vague but there.

Hermione dropped her wand and ran into the room, searching for the Hogwarts yearbook. She flipped through the pages, found exactly what she was looking for and when she went back out, realised that her guess was completely

right.

An expression of disbelief flitted across Hermione's features as she stared down at the girl, hugging the yearbook tightly to her chest. A person she knew very well from her past had finally returned back into her life, and she had no idea how to feel about it.

Draco didn't blink as a disarming spell was shot his way.

It bounced off him as usual - it always did; and he shot a killing curse right back at whoever had shot it at him. The

person promptly dropped dead, but Draco didn't even turn to look at his victim.

It was always easier that way. Ignorance was almost always the alternative to a life engulfed with guilt and shame, and Draco was already struggling to breathe in the waters of the latter.

He was duelling by the Dark Lord's side, which in retrospect was the worst position to be in, because he was now forced to kill instead of stunning his targets. When the Dark Lord had finally taken down the last enemy in the room, he turned to Draco.

"Do you know what the Order's main weakness is, Draco?"

Draco didn't even have to think twice.

"They show mercy where it's not needed, my lord."

"Precisely." The Dark Lord's lips stretched into a faint smile and Draco felt a faint shiver gloss his spine at the sight of it. "Now, where are the others?"

"The main hall, my lord. They're still fighting."

The Dark Lord nodded and headed out of the room, deliberately stepping on dead bodies if they happened to be in the way. Draco avoided them the best he could, but blood was everywhere and he was positive he reeked of it. They all did. It was part and parcel of the job. How Hermione could stand being near him was unfathomable.

The fight in the main hall was still going

strong, but it turned into a bloodbath the moment Draco and the Dark Lord stepped in. Midway through the fight, MacNair picked his way over to talk to their leader.

"My lord," he began, and the Dark Lord paused, looking faintly annoyed that he was distracted mid-battle. "It would be wise to leave some of the Order members alive, so we could get information out of them."

Draco paused, sneaking a quick glance over at MacNair. Surely, this wasn't something to do with the Deathly Hallows, was it?

The Dark Lord's lips tightened. "Are you questioning my decisions?"

"No, my lord. But information about the

Order, or what's left of them, is always useful and - "

The words froze on the tip of his tongue as a sudden curse flew towards him. But it was blocked at the very last second by an impenetrable, invisible shield. Both he and the Dark Lord turned, only to see Draco's wand poised to protect.

"Do watch your back, MacNair," Draco's smirk widened when the Dark Lord shot a murderous look at the other Death-Eater for nearly putting their lives in danger. "I might not always be the fucking knight in shining armour."

MacNair glared, before turning to the Dark Lord hastily, an apologetic expression on his face. "My lord, I had no idea - "

"Finish the fight. And you'll receive your punishment when this is over."

The Death-Eater went away, his shoulders tensed as he thought about the consequences of his careless behaviour. Once out of earshot, the Dark Lord glanced over at Draco. "We'll settle for capturing some of the members, since Harry Potter is nowhere in sight."

"Yes, my lord."

And Draco went off to spread the message to the others, shooting a silent killing curse at a badly injured person on the way, because he knew that being captured alive by Death-Eaters and then tortured for information was a fate far worse than death.

It wasn't until four when Theo finally returned back to the apartment. Hermione jumped up eagerly, relieved to see him, because Pansy and Blaise had already returned an hour ago. But one look at Theo's face and she shrank back, realising that he'd worked himself into a fine temper.

Theo cast a swift glance at the sleeping, injured girl on the sofa, and the expression on his face grew thunderous. He brushed past Hermione, heading straight for Pansy and wrenching the mug of hot chocolate away from her, banging

it violently down on the table. "What the fuck was that?"

"Whoa, Theo, calm down - "

"Shut up, Blaise. Draco's going to be equally as furious when he comes back. He had it all planned out, but you fucking botched it!"

Hermione hastily cast a muffling charm on the sleeping girl, before going warily towards the three Slytherins. Pansy looked equally as livid and she jumped up, shrugging off the warning hand Blaise placed on her shoulder.

"I botched it? I was trying to save their arses, Theodore - "

Theo snarled, casting a heated glare over at the sleeping girl in the living room. "You brought a member of the

Order into our apartment - "

"She was injured!"

"Then you leave her there to die!"

"No," Hermione couldn't stop the word from leaving her mouth. Theo turned to her, his eyes softening slightly when he saw the look of horror on her face. Hermione swallowed, and looked pleadingly at him. "She's - she's a friend, Theo."

Theo paused for a moment, but then he shook his head. "Fine, let's not go there," he said gruffly, but then his eyes narrowed and he turned back to Pansy. "Let's go to the part where you used Obliviate on the Order members after the Dark Lord changed his mind and asked that we capture them instead - "

Blaise tried to interrupt with his usual, calm manner, "but Theo - "

" - you too, Blaise, why the hell were you using Stupefys instead of Avadas? Huh? What the hell was that about?"

Blaise blinked. "The Dark Lord told us to capture them, not to kill them! If anything, I ought to be asking why you and Draco were killing people when the Dark Lord said not to. Don't think I didn't notice, Theo - the two of you killed countless of people on the way out - "

"Because it was the simplest way!"

Pansy snorted. "You mean the cruellest - "

"Do not even go there," and Theo's voice was deadly now. "We did what we had

to do. No regrets. It was for the greater good."

"The greater good?" Pansy stared at him in disbelief. "The greater good involves taking innocent lives for absolutely no reason when they could actually be spared?"

"Because it's a better fate than being captured," Hermione said.

The three of them turned to Hermione, who simply shrugged. Her mind was reeling with the brutality of war - it was like she'd finally opened her eyes and become aware of the chaos around her. But it made sense. It all made sense.

She thought of her days in torture and realised that there were times when she wished she were dead. The only thing,

or person, that kept her going was Draco; but not everyone was going to have a top Death-Eater searching for them for so long.

"If they're captured," she continued, hesitantly, "they'll be tortured - for information. The way I was. And - and not everyone's as lucky to be saved. So you kill them." She took a deep breath. "It's a form of mercy."

There was a heartbeat of silence.

Then Theo spoke. "Finally! Someone gets it," he sighed, before heading off towards his room. "I'm going to bed. Explain yourselves to Draco when he gets back."

"Wait - Theo," Hermione stopped him. "Do you want some potion for your

bruises?"

He shook his head. "It's fine, Red."

He went into his room, slamming the door shut behind him. Hermione looked at Blaise and Pansy, who wore matching looks of unease on their faces. It upset her that they were probably berating themselves for doing what they considered the right thing. And in a moral sense - it was the right choice, to save lives rather than to take them.

But the war was no place to make moral choices.

Hermione smiled lightly and tried to ease their worries. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Draco would understand."

"Of course he would," Blaise ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "We just

wouldn't be able to forgive ourselves if they're tortured to insanity."

Hermione felt a shudder go down her spine at his words. "Maybe they wouldn't be tortured," she said instead, trying to be optimistic about the situation. "Maybe - maybe the Order will come to rescue them."

"Highly unlikely," Pansy didn't seem convinced at all, even though the frown on Blaise's face eased up a little.

And so Hermione stayed silent as Pansy and Blaise went back to their room. She poured the remnants of hot chocolate down the sink and washed the cups manually, before checking up on the sleeping girl again.

The girl was fine, and Hermione heaved

a sigh of relief. Was this what it was like to be in a war? Not as a captured, tortured prisoner, but as a person fighting for a better day? She had quickly grasped the essence of it - the constant fear; the cold, sinking feeling of dread as each minute ticked by and the people she loved didn't return.

And that was the least of it. What if a time came for her to be on the battlefield, with them? What if she had to be the one to make the right choices - not the moral ones, but the right ones? It was impossible not to be wrecked up about it, to lose yourself a little by little as the war raged on and the guilt wore you down.

She took a deep breath and tried to clear

her head, instead keeping her eyes fixed on the clock and counting down the seconds to Draco's return. It wasn't until half past five in the morning when he finally did, looking utterly exhausted, with scratches and bruises freckling his skin, but none too severe that she couldn't mend.

"Granger, what - " his words were cut off when she launched into his arms, looping her arms around him and burying her face tightly against his neck.

"I'm so glad you're back," she whispered, holding back a strangled sob. "I'm so glad you're safe."

His lips curled up in a brief smirk against her skin, but he held her equally as tightly, perhaps too tightly - but it was

better than a grip loose enough to let her go anyway. "I did make you a promise, Granger."

23 | flipendo

2 3

f l i p e n d o

Knocks opponent over.

Hermione didn't quite know what to do when Luna awoke the next morning. She hadn't expected Luna to wake up so quickly, so it had taken her completely by surprise when the girl stirred awake. She wasn't even able to run out of the room in time - something she dreadfully wanted to do - and have Blaise or any of the other Slytherins take care of Luna

instead.

When Luna kept staring, Hermione knew that it was finally time to properly introduce herself. She allowed a shy, fleeting smile to curve her lips and nodded at the girl. "Hello, Luna."

"Hermione?"

Luna seemed unable to believe her eyes. She struggled to sit up and Hermione immediately went over to her, easing her back down onto the pillow. Draco had spent the past few hours clearing out the guest room, before Transfiguring a chair and using it as a makeshift bed for Luna.

"The Order's not going to be coming back for her so soon," Draco had said, when Hermione asked why Luna was to stay with them. "They're going to be too

busy saving their arses they wouldn't even think about the captured prisoners until at least a week later. Loony Lovegood's stuck with us."

"Lu-na," Hermione had corrected, smiling fondly at Draco when his eyes narrowed at her.

"It's Loony. Just wait till you have a bloody conversation with her - if you can even call it a conversation."

Hermione wasn't even sure she could have a conversation with Luna Lovegood anymore. The girl looked vaguely familiar but that was all, so it was really like going up to a complete stranger and striking up a conversation.

So Hermione forced her worries aside for a moment, concentrating instead on

Luna's wellbeing. "You're in a lot of pain. Just - just lie back down."

"Is it really you?" Luna's eyes were big and round as she stared up at Hermione.

"Yes, it's me," Hermione recoiled when Luna reached up to hug her. But the other girl was too swift and Hermione tried not to flinch when Luna wrapped her arms briefly around her.

"Everyone thought you were dead," Luna told her bluntly, after she'd pulled back, "but I've always told Neville that you weren't. And Harry and Ron and Ginny too. Although none of them seem to believe me. But they've missed you so much - we all do." Luna didn't seem to notice the frozen look on Hermione's face, and continued on in her breezy,

cheery manner. "It's so good to see you, Hermione. Everyone in the Order will be so happy to know that you're here. Where is here, anyway?"

Hermione felt herself shaking as she fell several steps away from the girl. "I - I have to get some potions, Luna," she stammered out, subconsciously realising that she was stammering badly all over again, "I'll - I'll be right back."

And before Luna could even reply, Hermione had rushed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Draco awoke that morning with a chilling terror seizing his heart when he

glanced over at the chair and found it empty. It wasn't until he recalled Looney Lovegood in the other room and realised that Hermione had probably gone to check up on her that the oxygen finally rushed back into his lungs.

He took his time in the shower, using his wand to heal the bruises on his abdomen. By the time he was done and had left the room, he found Theo, Blaise and Pansy sitting in the kitchen having breakfast. But it was different this morning - the house was filled with a tensed silence, and Pansy and Blaise seemed hardly able to look at him. He went over to them, dragging out a chair for himself and settling down at the table.

"Look," he began calmly, and waited until the two of them slowly dragged their gazes up to meet his. "Last night was a disaster - "

"A major disaster," Theo cut in, only to shut his mouth when Draco shot him a look.

" - it didn't go according to plan and it was a fucking loss for the Order. But it's not your fault," he told Blaise and turned to Pansy. "Or yours. We had a miscommunication; we weren't on the same wavelengths - the whole bloody mission was an unexpected one, for Merlin's sake."

He paused to take a deep breath. "We can't fall apart," he said flatly, wondering if they knew how important

they were to him. He'd never in a million years admit it, but the three of them, Hermione, Andromeda and her grandson Teddy were all he had left. "The Order's already in pieces and the Dark Lord's inner circle has traitors from within, so we can't break down. Do you three fucking get it?"

They seemed a little surprised by the vehemence in his tone, but nodded all the same. Theo had just opened his mouth to speak when Hermione came rushing out of the guest room. Her face was wrought with anxiety and she hurried past, not even noticing them in the kitchen as she headed straight for Draco's room. The door slammed shut behind her, and the four Slytherins

exchanged glances.

"Did anyone else find that odd?" was Theo's casual quip, to which Pansy rolled her eyes.

"Clever observation, Sherlock," but her voice was teasing and light, and Theo knew at once that the quarrel they had the night before was all but forgotten, so he grinned.

"You flatter me too much, Watson."

Blaise rolled his eyes, before casting an apologetic glance in Draco's direction.

"Luna's probably awake now. I didn't mean to leave Hermione in there for so long, but I didn't think the sleeping draught would wear off so quickly."

Draco got to his feet and poured out two mugs of tea, before heading out of the

kitchen. "Check up on Lovegood," he called over his shoulder to Blaise.

"Alright." But Blaise continued to sit at the table, even after Draco had returned back to his room.

Theo glanced at him in amusement. "Not looking forward to meeting Loony Lovegood, huh?"

Blaise gave him a flat look. "Are you?"

"Course not," Theo scoffed. "Red's not the only one uncomfortable around the loon. I'm sure we all are."

Hermione was pacing frantically in the room, her face drawn tight and worried, and Draco thought for a moment how

much she looked like her old self - always in action, always thinking, even in the face of trouble.

She glanced up the moment he entered, a look of utter relief registering on her face, and he'd barely had time to shut the door before she rushed into his arms. "Thank Merlin you're here," she choked out.

No, Draco thought, thank Merlin you're here.

But he didn't allow the words to leave his lips, and simply held her tight as she trembled, like the aftermath of a devastating earthquake. When she drew back, her eyes searched his frantically. "I - I don't want to go back to the Order, Draco."

"Is that what Lovegood said?"

"Well, she - she said the Order would be happy - to see me." Draco frowned as Hermione began to trip over her words again, in an attempt to get them out. "She said that - everyone thought I-I was dead, and that they'd be happy to hear that I'm alright."

The Order thought that Hermione Granger was dead? Draco suddenly felt something like a slow burn of anger rise inside him. All these years, he'd always thought that the Order hadn't been searching for Hermione because they'd been too busy struggling to survive. So he'd let that slide.

But this - this was new. This was cold. The Order hadn't looked for Hermione

simply because they'd presumed her dead. Logically, it was the right decision and Draco knew that he too held this sort of mentality when it came to the war - but this was Hermione Granger, and you didn't fucking give up on Hermione Granger even if she went missing.

"Draco?"

He blinked and focused back on her.

"Yeah?"

A tiny smile glossed her lips as she looked up at him fondly. "I-I was saying - do you think it's wrong that I have no wish to go back to the Order?" His eyebrows rose and she hastened to explain herself, "I mean - I feel like it's selfish of me to not want to. I feel like I have to help them too, because that's

something I used to do. But - " she sighed, meeting his gaze frankly. " - I want to stay with you."

"Then don't go," he blurted abruptly. The words slipped past his lips, far too swift and selfish to catch, and he felt like a bastard for even wanting Hermione to stay with him, but it was the truth. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Really?"

"Yes," he rushed out, and this was the closest to a confession that Hermione was ever going to get. He pulled her close and buried his face in her curls, because he didn't think he could look her in the eyes and say it out loud. "Stay with me."

He felt her smile against his skin.

"Of course."

Theo had lost to Pansy and Blaise at rock-paper-scissors - a game that Hermione had taught him several days ago. And so he had to be the one to bring Loony Lovegood the healing potions.

To say he wasn't looking forward to it would be an understatement. Theo thought it was the stupidest thing he'd ever had to do and that was saying a hell lot, because he'd done a lot of stupid things all through his life.

He didn't bother to knock on the door to the guestroom. Instead, he used his wand to open the door, before holding it out

protectively in front of him and keeping his grip tight, just in case the girl in the room decided to use an Avada on him, even though it seemed highly unlikely.

But he almost fell over in shock when Loony Lovegood simply smiled at him pleasantly and nodded. "Hello, Theodore."

"Uh - "

"I knew I saw you last night in the fight. And I think I saw Draco too. In fact, I think he was the one who hexed me. Would you thank him for me?"

"Are you serious - "

"Hexes are a lot better than death, I think. I knew you two weren't entirely bad, despite being Death-Eaters, and I presume - "

"Okay, stop talking," Theo blurted, when he finally gathered his wits about him. He'd never felt quite so overwhelmed before, and he considered himself one hell of a conversationalist, but Loony Lovegood here had somehow left him speechless. He stared at her for a moment or two, to which she stared back calmly, before smiling amicably.

"How are you, Theodore?"

"I told you to fucking stop talking," he growled, waving his wand and levitating the tray of healing potions onto the bed.

"Stop talking, and drink these."

She was silent as she drank the potions and Theo took the time to process the odd more or less one-sided conversation that they'd just had. He couldn't even

wrap his head around the fact that she didn't seem surprised or afraid to see him, which she should've been.

He was a Death-Eater, for Merlin's sake. People were supposed to take one look at him and run away screaming. Either that or he was losing his touch. He frowned, and reached up to massage his forehead briefly.

"Do you have a headache?"

He scowled automatically, flicking a brief glance at the girl. To his greatest dismay, she was almost done with the potions. That meant she'd only start talking again. "No."

"Would you like to share some of the potion? I think it's a great pain-reliever -
"

"No, I'm good."

She finished the last bit of her potions quickly before pushing herself up, settling back comfortably against the headboard with the pillow tucked behind her. Then she smiled serenely at him.

"So how have you been, Theodore?"

"Stop calling me that."

"What? Theodore?"

"Yes. It's just Theo."

"Theo?" She shot him a quizzical look.

"Why not Dora?"

"Would you like to be hexed?"

"No, thank you. But really, why not Dora?" She insisted earnestly. "It sounds better than Theo. You know, that's a nickname for Theodore too."

"It's a nickname for Theodora, you ..."

and then Theo trailed off because he simply couldn't think of any insult to fling at her. "You bloody Ravenclaw - "

Her eyebrows rose. "Of course I'm a Ravenclaw, which house did you think I was in?"

"For Salazar's sake - " Theo pointed his wand in her direction, "silen - "

But Theo suddenly found the last syllable of the word frozen on the tip of his tongue as he was hit by a body-binding curse from the back. Draco strode in, shooting Theo an aggravated look as he quickly lifted the spell before turning to Luna.

"Death-Eaters have very little patience, Lovegood," he told her shortly, and gestured to Theo. "And this one has

close to none. Try not to use any of your whimsical insanity on him - he doesn't appreciate it."

Luna hardly seemed offended, smiling brightly at Draco instead. "Hello, Draco. Hermione," she added, glancing past him and at the girl standing nervously by the doorway.

Hermione managed a shy wave. "Hi. How - how're you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm much better. The potions are working well and Theo and I just had a lovely conversation."

Theo's mouth fell open. "You're really weird - "

"Go to work," Draco interrupted, shooting Theo a flat look when he hesitated. "Now."

"Fine." Theo gave Luna one last glare before turning to leave.

On the way out, he passed Hermione, who couldn't help but let a tiny laugh spill from her lips. "Bye, Dora."

But unlike the heated reaction Theo had previously given to Luna, he simply rolled his eyes and left the room. Luna watched Hermione curiously. Clearly, a lot of things had changed since the war began. Luna was already trying to wrap her head around the fact that Hermione was alive, and that she apparently lived in a house with two Death-Eaters, Death-Eaters who once upon a time used to be her arch-nemeses.

She wanted to mull on the matter more, but her leg began to ache once again and

she reached forward in an attempt to soothe it. She didn't have to, however, because Draco had quickly taken several steps forward, placing the tip of his wand just above the inflammation.

Immediately, the pain subsided. "Thank you," she smiled at him, feeling both relieved by the pain and impressed at his knowledge of wordless magic at the same time. "And thank you for hexing me last night."

Draco's eyebrows shot up.

"You could've killed me. I think it's nice that you didn't."

Something in her words seemed to have struck a nerve, and he began to walk away. "Don't think so highly of me, Lovegood. You know I would if the

situation called for it."

He headed out of the room, but Hermione remained, faltering by the doorway for a few seconds, before glancing over at Luna.

"He'll be alright," Hermione said, although her words seemed meant more for herself than for Luna. She smiled faintly at the girl on the bed. "Are you hungry?"

"No," Luna shook her head, before patting the empty spot next to her. "I'd much rather talk to you. It's been so long and I don't even know what you've been up to."

Hermione felt something wedge itself in her throat. She wished desperately that Draco was with her, but he had a

meeting with the Dark Lord, and there was no one else left in the house.

"I - I'd much rather not," Hermione choked out, forcing herself to take deep calming breaths instead. "Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

If Luna noticed Hermione's evasive behaviour, she didn't dwell further on it. She simply nodded and smiled. "Alright. Won't you take a seat?" She patted the spot next to her again but Hermione had other ideas. She dragged over a chair and sat close to the bed, but maintaining a good distance between herself and Luna.

Hermione listened silently as Luna happily rambled on about the Order and about the lives they led during the war.

But she hardly registered anything. Instead, she watched Luna closely, noticing the way the girl's grey eyes lit up when she spoke about her friends, or the sad curve on her lips when she spoke about the Order.

Hermione felt like she remembered Luna from a dream a long time ago. Only it wasn't just a dream - it was the past, and it involved far too many people and events that she'd long forgotten. And the fact that she could not physically wake up from this dream was all the more terrifying.

Draco knew that he was going to relive

his worst nightmare the moment he stepped into the Malfoy Manor.

He remembered the first time it happened all too clearly. The white walls and dark shadows. Bellatrix's insane eyes and haunting cackles of laughter. And screams, screams and more screams.

The only difference now was that neither his mother nor Hermione were there.

That thought alone was enough to help him maintain his composure and he strode into the hall with Antonin Dolohov and Walden MacNair in tow. Only the top Death-Eaters were there, along with the captured members of the Order.

"Ah, there you are," Bellatrix's shrill

voice demanded his attention, "come, Draco. I believe there are certain classmates of yours you may be familiar with."

She led him over to the prisoners and he immediately saw that there were fifteen of them in total, some who were complete strangers and others whom he vaguely recognised. Seamus Finnigan was among them, and when Seamus's eyes narrowed in recognition, Draco met his gaze evenly. He stared for a second or two, before looking at the person beside him - Susan Bones, whose gaze was suspiciously vacant. Cho Chang and Terry Boot were among those captured as well.

Draco could almost taste the bile rising

up in his throat.

"So?" Bellatrix looked at him eagerly, and he knew that the other Death-Eaters were too. "Any of them ring a bell?"

The feeling of déjà vu sent a shiver running down his spine as he recalled how his father had once made him do the same thing.

"It's been awhile, Bellatrix," he found himself saying. It was the same string of reluctance, the same evasiveness, the same cowardice. He hated himself for it. "I don't remember most faces."

"Doesn't matter," Dolohov said now, stepping up beside Draco. He seemed quite eager at the prospect of interrogating the prisoners. "Let's begin." "Draco is in charge of this," Bellatrix

retorted sharply, before lunging out to grab Susan Bones by her hair. Susan let out a painful cry, and the other prisoners immediately stepped forward to help, only to be held back by the other Death-Eaters.

"Start with her, Draco," Bellatrix said, holding her wand to Susan's neck. "She was a snivelling, pathetic mess earlier and she'd break so pretty."

Draco took one more look at Susan's blank gaze. And beside Susan, Seamus Finnigan caught his eyes and shook his head. A slight, almost invisible movement, but Draco knew what it meant. Pansy's spell from the night before had clearly worked.

So Draco simply shrugged. "She's of no

use to us. Someone used Obliviate on her."

"You know, sometimes the Cruciatus can force a person to remember things after awhile," MacNair commented, from the side.

Draco wanted nothing more to hurl a killing curse at MacNair there and then. He knew now without a doubt that this had been what the Peverells had done to Hermione. His jaw clenched, and he could feel the blood pounding in his ears.

"I'm not going to waste my time on someone who may or may not remember," he said shortly. He glanced over at Seamus again, and a fleeting look of mutual understanding passed between

them. "Let's start with you."

Seamus didn't say a word as he stepped forward. His posture was rigid, features defiant.

"Let me know when you want to talk about the fucking Order," Draco told him calmly, casting a wordless numbing spell on Seamus, whose eyes flickered in surprise as the spell hit him. "Until then - "

He pointed the wand at Seamus, a sinking feeling of dread and self-loathing spreading from within. Just more red on his ledger.

"Crucio."

"So...Nargles."

Theo shot a look of disbelief at Luna. The girl had only been there for a day, but she treated the apartment like she'd been living there for years, and treated them like they were her closest friends. Luna had finally decided she was well enough to get out of bed sometime in the late afternoon, and had hobbled into the living room on a poor foot with Hermione holding her up. She'd then spent an hour talking to Blaise and Pansy about the Order when they'd finally returned home, until they had to prepare dinner. And when Theo himself returned from work, Luna promptly told him about a Nargle infestation in the Order's headquarters.

Theo didn't even know what a bloody Nargle was.

"They're very mischievous creatures," Luna added. "Best to keep them at bay."

"How?" Hermione asked curiously. She'd never quite warmed up to anyone so quickly after her capture before - apart from Draco, of course - but Luna was so fascinating and Hermione couldn't help but be interested in what she had to say.

"I used to have a Butterbeer cork necklace and plum earrings. Those kept the Nargles away fairly well."

"And where would one get a Butterbeer cork necklace?"

"Oh, you don't buy them. You make them

- "

Theo rolled his eyes, realising that the conversation was becoming more ridiculous by the minute. "For Merlin's sake, Nargles aren't even real!"

Hermione shot him a firm look. "It's better to be safe than sorry. What if we have a Nargle infestation in this apartment?"

"We wouldn't have a sodding infestation because they're not real!"

"Well, you thought I was dead - until you saw me."

He glared at her, before leaning back in resignation and grumbling under his breath. Hermione smiled and opened her mouth to speak, but Draco apparated back at that moment. His silver eyes were stormy as they met Hermione's, but

the moment she stood, he dragged his gaze away and quickly headed into his room.

Hermione glanced over questioninglly at Theo, who shrugged. Luna wouldn't have known, of course, but the matching confusion on Blaise and Pansy's faces as they stood by the doorway of the kitchen told her that they didn't have a clue either.

Without wasting another moment, Hermione went into Draco's room, pausing by the doorway when she saw him. He had his arms braced on the table and he was leaning against it, deep, silent shudders wracking through his body.

He glanced up the moment she shut the

door. The expression on his face was something close to desperation as he walked up to her quickly, and wound his arms around her, pulling her to him tightly.

"Don't say anything," he pleaded, and Hermione felt her chest tighten at the brokenness of his voice. "Just - just let me - "

And then he seemed incapable of saying anything more, so she just held him tight, shifting her head slightly so she could press a brief kiss to his forehead. He made something like a low, strangled sob deep in his throat and buried his face in her hair. And she held on tight, because in this war, it was somehow the one thing she could do best.

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a r e s t o m o m e n t u m

Slows or stops target's descent.

The frantic ringing of the telephone woke Hermione the next morning.

She blinked for a moment or two, feeling her heart pull when she realised that Draco's chair was empty and he'd left without saying goodbye. But then she quickly pulled herself together, scrambling for the telephone on the bedside table.

"Hello?"

"Hermione, is that you?" It was Andromeda. Her voice sounded weary and tensed, and Hermione immediately clutched the phone tighter against her ear.

"Yes, it's me. Is - is everything alright?"

"On the Order's end? No," Andromeda readily admitted.

Hermione felt her chest tighten with worry. She knew that the Death-Eaters had scored a victory in their attack on the Order's headquarters, and that Luna was one of the few lucky escapees. Judging by Draco's behaviour the night before, Hermione easily guessed that the captured Order members weren't fairing as well.

Hermione couldn't help but wonder if any of her old friends had been captured by the Death-Eaters. Even if she didn't remember them, she worried about their safety.

"Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Actually, I'm calling to help you," Andromeda corrected. "Not you, particularly, but Draco and his friends."

Hermione swallowed as a nervous fear began to claw its way through her from within. "W-what's going to happen?"

"Alright - do listen very carefully, Hermione. The Order is planning on fighting back in two weeks' time - "

Hermione's eyes widened. So Draco was right after all, to predict that the Order wouldn't be doing anything for at

least a week because they'd be too busy trying to recover from the aftermath of their defeat.

" - and they're going to attempt to free their captured members. They're going to be sending in their most proficient fighters, so please let Draco know that he has to be careful and try not to get caught in the crossfire."

Hermione understood Andromeda's sentiments. Draco killing one of her friends from the Order was just as bad as him getting killed by one of her friends, or even worse.

She took a deep breath. "I-I'll let him know, Andromeda. Thank you for telling us."

"You're welcome, Hermione,"

Andromeda returned, and the air suddenly eased when she continued, in a lighter tone this time, "so, tell me, how was your Christmas?"

And Hermione smiled, her worries dissipating for a moment as she told Andromeda about the Christmas she spent with the four Slytherins. It was a memory that left a warm feeling inside her in the midst of a cold, cruel war, and Hermione wanted never to forget that.

Hermione left the room a good two hours later, after a lengthy conversation with Andromeda and a comforting, warm bath. She found Blaise and Luna in

the living room, Luna's feet propped up on the coffee table as Blaise examined her splinched wound carefully.

"...the Order's very strict about things like these," Luna was saying, as Blaise applied more Dittany on her leg. "Resources are low, you see, and sometimes we have food rationing. Otherwise we might not have enough to go around." She paused and glanced up, smiling when she saw Hermione hovering by the doorway of Draco's room. "Hello, Hermione."

Hermione headed towards them, her lips tugging upwards when Blaise turned too and shot her a wide grin by way of greeting. "How're you feeling today, Luna?"

"I'm a lot better," Luna returned, even though she flinched when Blaise gently prodded the inflamed wound. "What about you?"

"Er - I'm good," Hermione stammered, rather thrown-off by Luna's sudden question. She opened her mouth to ask Blaise about Draco, but realised abruptly that it wasn't the best idea with Luna, a member of the Order, in the same room. "Blaise - can I speak with you for a moment?" she asked instead.

Blaise glanced up in surprise, but he seemed to sense her anxiousness and quickly nodded. "Sure. Just give me a second, Red."

Luna stared curiously at Blaise. "Why do you call Hermione 'Red'? Is that a

Gryffindor joke?"

"No, it's an inside joke. Theo found out that Hermione blushes a lot so he started calling her that, and Pansy and I kind of jumped on the bandwagon."

"Interesting," Luna commented, sounding rather amused. "Back during Hogwarts days, some of us used to call her 'Mione.'"

Hermione cringed at the unfamiliar nickname, but felt curious nonetheless. It was interesting to hear bits and pieces about her past life. Sometimes it felt like an uncanny feeling, that of déjà vu; while at other times it almost seemed as though she were looking at a stranger's life altogether.

"If Theo were here, he'd call that level

of affection appalling," Blaise replied, with a chuckle. He finished up bandaging Luna's leg, and stood up. "Try not to move too much. We'll check on you in a few hours to change the bandages."

Luna nodded and settled back against the chair. "Thank you, Blaise."

"Feel better soon, Luna."

"Thanks, Hermione."

Hermione gave a weak parting wave to Luna before following Blaise into the kitchen. He cast a muffling charm on the room before turning to her. "What's up, Red?"

"It's about Draco," Hermione began, shuffling uneasily from one foot to the other as she leaned against the counter.

"Is everything alright with him?"

Blaise let out a troubled sigh. He poured himself a cup of tea, along with another for Hermione and handed it to her. "He didn't tell you anything, huh?"

"No - not exactly," she acceded, remembering how Draco had held on to her and told her not to say anything. It was different this time - Draco usually clung on to her words like they meant something to him, but he'd refused any this time round, as if he'd done something terrible and didn't deserve to be comforted.

"He didn't tell us anything either," Blaise said flatly. "He didn't even speak to any of us before he left for work this morning. But Theo suspects that it has

something to do with the Order."

Hermione frowned, wondering if Draco had already heard the latest about the Order. "How so?"

"Well, the Dark Lord made us capture the remaining members instead of killing them off, remember?"

A fleeting look of guilt flashed in Blaise's eyes and Hermione nodded hesitantly, wondering if he was thinking about that night when Theo had told him that being a prisoner during a war was far worse than being killed in one.

"Anyway, as head Death-Eater, Draco's usually in charge of interrogating the most important information. And - well, the main method of getting information out of prisoners is through the Cruciatus,

so..."

Blaise seemed incapable of continuing but he didn't have to - Hermione understood perfectly. It meant that he had to torture the Order members, some of which were most likely people he knew back during Hogwarts days. Hermione began to wonder if Neville Longbottom or Harry Potter were any of the members Draco had to torture, and felt her chest tighten at the mere thought of that.

"I blame myself and Pansy for it, mostly," Blaise said, after a long pause. "If we'd stuck to the plan and - and killed, unthinkingly, maybe it'd lessen so much of the suffering they'd have to go through now."

"Well - at least they're still alive,"

Hermione said optimistically, remembering how Andromeda had told her about the Order's plan earlier that morning. She just hoped that the Order would embark on their rescue mission before it was all too late.

But Blaise didn't seem to hear her, and his voice was thick with self-reproach as he continued, "we just didn't think about the aftermath, that they'd be tortured and that Draco would have to be the one doing the torturing."

Hermione fell silent. She knew that Draco, as a Death-Eater, had sunk to the lowest of the low. He'd tortured prisoners and taken too many lives to count. But he was also good, because so long as he had a conscience and tried to

fight for a war that seemed never to end - then he was good because he wasn't entirely lost.

Right?

There were times when the war was so morally ambiguous that, just like Draco, she didn't know what she believed in anymore.

Draco found the rest of his flatmates in the guest room that evening. Hermione was mending the rest of Luna's bruises, and Theo was dozing off in the armchair, while the other two were listening intently as Luna told them about the Order.

Hermione was the first to spot him, and she immediately jumped up, excused herself and followed him into their room. "Everything alright, Draco?"

Something in her voice made him pause, and he turned to look at her warily. "Theo told you about - "

"Blaise," she confessed. "He didn't mean to; I asked him to."

And while a part of him was irked that her impression of him simply had to be tainted, a more rational part of him knew that what he did as a Death-Eater couldn't be kept hidden forever, and it was a lot easier that she knew so she'd no longer think the world of him.

Because, frankly, he didn't deserve it.

"MacNair took over today," he said

flippantly, shrugging out of his suit jacket and going into the bathroom to wash his hands. Thoroughly, so he'd be rid of all the bloodstains, even though some seemed permanently etched into his skin. "And Bellatrix. I guess I should be fucking grateful to them."

Hermione didn't reply. She simply waited until he came back out from the bathroom before she wrapped her arms around him. After a moment or two, his arms latched around her, pulling her flush against him. His grip was too tight - it always was, as though he was terrified to lose her and he didn't know that she was just as terrified to lose him. "Andromeda called today," Hermione said softly, after a while.

"What did she say?"

"She said that - that the Order was planning on fighting back in two weeks' time."

Draco pulled back, a frown slipping onto his face as he stared at her. "What?"

"She said you might want to watch your back. In case - you get caught in the crossfire. The Order's sending in some of their best fighters and - and she thinks it's best if you and the others stay away."

But before Draco could reply, the door suddenly opened with a click and Theo barged in, an expression of incredulity on his face. "The Order is fighting back?"

The look on Draco's face grew thunderous. "For Merlin's sake, Theo - "

"So, what, they finally grew some balls?" Theo ran an exasperated hand through his hair before glaring at the two of them. "And you weren't going to tell us? I thought we shared everything - "

"I just found out a few seconds before you did," Draco growled, cutting him off mid-rant. "I was going to tell you anyway, so just calm down."

Theo paused, glancing sheepishly at Draco's annoyed expression, before looking at Hermione's amused one. He flushed. "Oh."

"And why the hell were you eavesdropping into our conversation?"

Theo rolled his eyes. "I wasn't eavesdropping. I was going to knock on your bloody door because I wanted to

borrow a book and just happened to overhear, that's all." His lips suddenly curled upwards in a mischievous smirk and his eyes glinted. "I was actually hoping to hear some dirty talk. Don't disappoint me next time, alright, Red?" Hermione promptly flushed.

And Draco shot him another deadly look. "What do you want, Theo?"

He shrugged, and pushed himself up on the desk, staring curiously at the two of them. "I want to know if it's true - what you said about the Order."

"What about the Order?" A familiar voice sounded by the doorway. Blaise.

And it wasn't just Blaise. Draco's eyes narrowed when he realised that not only

had Blaise overheard, but so had Pansy and Luna, who were standing behind him with matching curious looks on their faces.

"Apparently, the Order's finally fighting back," Theo told them. "And, apparently, it's best if we stay away because they're sending in some of their best fighters. That's all I managed to hear," he gestured towards Draco and Hermione as a sign for them to continue, but Draco simply glared back.

"And they're going to attempt to free their members," Hermione added, her voice small. "In - in two weeks. That's all we know."

The pause that followed was prolonged and uncertain. Blaise was the first to

break it, inching farther into the room and hitching himself up onto the table next to Theo. "Where'd you get this information from?" He asked Hermione, who glanced unsurely at Draco.

"From a reliable source. We can trust the person," Draco returned vaguely, his voice carefully flat as he regarded Blaise with an unreadable, guarded expression that made Hermione instantly curious.

And her curiosity was satisfied mere seconds later, when Blaise's face began to light up with an inexplicable sort of relief. "Are you serious?"

Draco stiffened. "Zabini - "

"Draco, you knew I was going to suggest this sooner or later. It's the perfect

opportunity, what with the Order returning in full force - "

"Hardly any force - "

" - it's better than nothing. They're fighting again and that's good enough for me. You know that this wasn't a permanent thing - not for me, at least, and that - "

"Hold on," Theo interrupted, looking more confused by the second as he glanced between Draco and Blaise. "What the hell are you two going on about?"

Blaise paused, casting a brief look at Draco, who simply sat down on his bed in resignation. "I'm saying," Blaise began, slowly, carefully, because there was really no easy, quick way to break

the news. "I think we should defect to the Order."

The room was silent enough to hear a pin drop. Hermione found her head reeling with the sudden turn of events. She knew all along that among the four Slytherins, Blaise was the one with the biggest moral compass, and that as the Death-Eater with the softest of hearts, he'd been struggling all this while.

But to actually defect to the Order?

Hermione wanted to support Blaise, but it honestly seemed like a death wish, particularly for someone in his position.

Theo was the first to break the stunned silence, staring at Blaise like he'd just sprouted three heads. "Are you serious?"

"I mean it, Theo. It's the perfect time! We

can finally meet the Order, return Luna to them and even help the Order - "

"Okay, can someone check him for the Imperius curse?"

"Actually," Luna cut in, her voice lilting and cheerful, "I think it's a splendid idea."

Theo paused to shoot her a glare. "Yes, it would be splendid. Splendid to have Blaise become a traitor to the Dark Lord, not to mention having a bounty put on his head with Snatchers trailing his every move, Dementors ready to suck the life out of him, and his friends bound by their Death-Eater duties to hunt him down."

"We're not going to hunt him down," Pansy interjected.

"So you agree, then? That Blaise's idea is bloody insane?"

"No," Pansy stepped into the room, a placid look on her face as she looped her arm through Blaise's. "I'm defecting too. I think we all should - all four of us. You'll come too, Hermione."

Theo's mouth actually fell open in horror this time and Hermione couldn't help the startled gasp that spilled from her lips. Only Luna seemed pleased, while Draco didn't look surprised at all. And Hermione wondered if perhaps Draco had already anticipated that this day was coming - and it was all just a matter of when.

"Have I fallen through a fucking rabbit hole?" Theo shouted, sounding utterly

appalled, and Hermione was sure that if she weren't so alarmed, she would've laughed at Theo's reaction. "What's wrong with the both of you?"

Luna stepped forward. "They just want to help - "

"Stay out of this, Loony - "

"You know," Blaise began to sound annoyed now, "it would be nice if you could at least be a little supportive, Theo. I thought we were in this together."

"You are asking a lot out of me and Draco," Theo snarled, now sounding well and truly pissed. "It's not good enough that the both of you defect - now you want Draco and me to defect as well? Draco's the top Death-Eater, he'll

be at the top of the Dark Lord's hit list if he defected."

Theo's words sent a shiver of dread down Hermione's spine, and she glanced over at Draco. But he was sitting calmly, watching the three Death-Eaters and Luna with a thoughtful, indifferent expression. Hermione slipped her hand into his, and he cast a brief glance her way, his lips curling in a fleeting smirk before looking back at them.

"...you've forgotten that the Order is in bloody shambles right now," Theo was saying, as Hermione refocused on their conversation. "Let's say we manage to find them, do you honestly think they'd willingly let us fight on the same side as them, let alone hide us from the other

Death-Eaters?"

"I'm sure something can be arranged," said Luna, "I'll let the Order know that you aren't a bad lot."

Blaise smiled. "See? Luna's going to put in a good word for us. We'll be fine."

"That is the least of our troubles. You know what - " and Theo paused abruptly, casting a wary glance at Luna.

Draco followed his gaze and finally spoke. "Lovegood, could you leave us alone for a moment?"

"Alright," Luna returned easily, and slowly hobbled out of the room. "I do hope you choose to defect, though. It would be nice to have some Death-Eaters on our side."

"Bugger off, Loony - " Theo began, only

to subside when Blaise jabbed him with his elbow.

When Luna had left, Pansy went over to shut the door, casting a muffling charm on the room before turning back to Theo. She folded her arms across her chest as her gaze turned challenging. "You were saying?"

Theo glared. "I was saying that this isn't what 17-65's supposed to be. We wreck havoc from within, we destroy the Dark Lord's inner circle by finding out information or by preventing information from passing through - "

"Things change," Blaise fired back. "With the Dark Lord knowing about the Order's existence, they're going to need all the help they can get."

"Do you even comprehend the consequences if we actually chose to defect? Since when did you two start harbouring these kind of ideas that'll only get you bloody killed?"

"Since always!" Pansy cried, in exasperation. And she sounded so aggravated that Theo stopped mid-rant to stare at her in surprise. She sighed, and looked pleadingly at both Theo and Draco. "I am tired of being in a war that never seems to end," she said, her voice choked and weary. "I am tired of waking up every bloody morning and knowing that I'm going to have to use the Cruciatus or the Avada on someone. I am tired of numbing myself with spells and potions just so I can continue to do

horrible things without feeling guilty." She paused to take a deep breath. "Blaise and I know how this ends," she continued, sounding far calmer this time. "We go down fighting, whatever the outcome of the war is. But since we're going down fighting, we'd like to at least fight on the side of good. Just so we don't forget what goodness is, because in this war, it's so easy to forget sometimes."

"Exactly what she said," Blaise wrapped his arms around Pansy's waist, pressing a brief kiss to her cheek. "So are you two with us?"

There was a glimmer of hope in Blaise's eyes as he waited. Theo stared at them for a long moment before letting out a

sigh. "I'm with Draco," he said at last, before glancing at his friend. "Mate?"

Draco's gaze sharpened and he slowly got to his feet. "It's far too great a risk," his voice was flat, the expression in his eyes carefully blank. "And in a war like this, I'm not sure if we can afford to take that risk."

"What're you saying?" Pansy couldn't quite mask the disappointment as she stared at Draco, who simply shrugged and didn't say anything else. She looked up at Blaise, who seemed equally as disappointed as she was. "We should probably go."

She and Blaise left the room and Theo, after a moment's hesitation, turned to go too. He paused briefly before he left to

shoot a quick wink at Hermione. "See you tomorrow, Red."

Hermione smiled; glad to see at at least one person wasn't thoroughly shaken up after the heated debate. "Goodnight, Theo."

He grinned and shut the door behind him. And then all was silent in the room once more. Their earlier shouting was still resonating in Hermione's ears, and she rather felt like an earthquake had just swept through the room, leaving nothing but a mass of destruction and uncertainty in its wake.

She turned to Draco, taking a deep breath before asking tentatively, "what are you going to do?"

He looked at her in amusement. "Don't

know, Granger. Didn't you notice my evasiveness earlier?"

"I-I thought you were just deep in thought."

"No, I was fucking evading," he smirked briefly before falling back against the pillow, letting out a deep sigh and closing his eyes. "What do you think I should do, Granger?"

Hermione stared at him in surprise. His eyes were shut, so she couldn't detect the expression in them and his face was calm as ever. But there was a certain hesitation in his voice, like he was just as lost as she was.

"I-I don't know," she said softly, reaching down to thread her fingers through his. "I think you're safest here, in

this apartment," she admitted, "and not with the Order. I just want you to be safe."

His eyes opened slowly and they were a silvery dark in the moonlit room as he watched her with an expression she couldn't quite decipher. "Come here," he murmured, reaching up to grasp her arm firmly, tugging her down onto the bed next to him.

She readily obliged, curling up against him and revelling in the way his arm wrapped securely around her waist. "Honestly - it doesn't matter where you go. Just take me with you," she told him. "I'm a part of this war now just as much as you are."

He didn't say anything. But a moment

later, he shifted, pressing his lips gently to her forehead. She shut her eyes, feeling the steady thrum of his heart beneath her cheek and wondering what the future held in store for them.

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Destroys solid objects.

The tension in the kitchen was palpable the next morning. Hermione had found Luna sitting at the table talking animatedly to Blaise and Pansy about the Order, while Theo was sitting on the counter, watching them with a guarded, almost hostile expression on his face. Hermione felt a pang of sympathy for

Theo, who was clearly the odd one out in this debate, so after pouring herself a cup of tea, she pushed herself up on the counter next to Theo. He shot her a brief grin and she smiled back, pleased to find that she was comfortable just sitting next to him.

Some minutes later, Draco entered the kitchen, his blond hair wet from his shower and falling haphazardly into his eyes. He brushed an impatient hand through his hair, pausing when he noticed the evident tension all round. Everyone had turned to look at him expectantly, and the hopeful expressions on Blaise and Pansy's faces were unmistakable.

"Granger," he glanced over at Hermione,

who immediately climbed off the counter. "Could you help Lovegood into the room? The four of us have some things to discuss."

Hermione quickly nodded, going over to help Luna to her feet. After the two girls had disappeared into the guest room, Draco cast a silent muffling charm on the kitchen and turned to the other three Slytherins.

"I once said that we can't fall apart," he began flatly, and the resignation in his voice was sufficient for Blaise and Pansy to brighten. "I think we're better off sticking together. Sorry, Theo," Draco added, casting a brief, apologetic look at his friend.

Theo simply shrugged. He quite guessed

that this was the outcome, because Blaise and Pansy had been so insistent on their decision that he knew Draco would have no choice but to go along with them.

"But we're going to defect my way," Draco continued, and Theo smirked now, because it was just classic, arrogant Draco Malfoy and the world was now righted on its axis once again.

Pansy and Blaise also seemed amused as they stared at him. "Alright," Blaise replied good-naturedly, "what do you suggest we do?"

"We'll have to destroy this place," Draco replied promptly, "so that no one discovers what we've been doing this past three years. We'll have to camp

somewhere else in the meantime."

His words were met with stunned silence.

Theo slowly recovered, but his expression was still laced with incredulity. "Are you fucking serious?"

Draco shot him a sardonic look. "Do I look like I'm fucking joking?"

"But - but this is our home," Pansy said, sounding well and truly distressed.

"You're talking about leaving everything - and I do mean everything, all the memories and all the fun we've had behind, and it's just - "

"Do you want to defect, or not?"

Pansy quickly subsided. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Draco shook his head, "I hate this as much as you do, but it's the safest

option. We have to destroy this place, that's one. The second thing is that we can't all defect at once. It's far too suspicious. I don't want us to be fucking killed before we can even contact the Order."

"Actually," Blaise cut in, setting down his mug of tea, "I think I have a suggestion. How about Pansy and I defect - while you and Theo find some other more obscure way around it?" Draco began to frown, and Blaise hastily explained, "this is something the two of us chose to do. You and Theo are just going along with it. So we should bear the consequences of our decision in full force."

Pansy nodded in agreement. Draco

mulled over Blaise's words, his mind rapidly searching for an alternative solution based on Blaise's suggestion.

"Alright," he acknowledged, at last.

"You two can defect, and you two can do it on the day the Order attacks us. And Theo and I will somehow allow ourselves to be captured by the Order."

"What?"

Draco smirked at the horrified look on Theo's face. "It's not that fucking difficult, Theo. You just don't fight back or block any spells."

"What if they shoot an Avada at me?"

Theo yelped, glaring daggers at Draco.

"Am I supposed to just stand still and let them?"

"Yes."

"Fuck you, Draco - "

"They don't use killing curses, Theo," Blaise cut in, sounding rather amused. Theo turned to him in confusion, and he chuckled. "Didn't you notice when you fought the Order the other night? They don't use any of the Unforgivables."

"Harry didn't even use an Avada on the Dark Lord during the battle of Hogwarts," Pansy added. "Remember? He used a stupid Expelliarmus. Practically child's play compared to the killing curse."

Theo glared when he realised that he'd been well and truly fooled. He turned to Draco, whose eyes were gleaming. "And you knew that?"

Draco shrugged and grabbed the mug of

tea that Blaise had poured for him. "I didn't survive three years just for the Order to kill me," he smirked as he headed out of the kitchen, leaving Theo staring after him in aggravation.

"Maybe I would," Theo muttered under his breath, reaching for his wand and casting a random, harmless jinx at Draco's departing figure.

Only to have Draco easily deflect it without even having to glance over his shoulder. Theo groaned in defeat. As usual.

Luna couldn't help but think that in all the years she'd known Hermione, she'd never seen the girl quite so calm before. She watched curiously as the brunette slowly replaced a new bandage her splinched wound, before using her wand to ease the swelling of other bruises.

Hermione was completely focused in her task - a characteristic that Luna found reminiscent of the old Hermione - but the war had taken away some of her overeager, easily-excitabile teenage charm and replaced it with something more mellow. Luna couldn't place a finger on it, but she thought that Hermione seemed far more at ease now than she ever was.

"Can I ask you something?" Luna began,

when curiosity finally got the better of her.

Hermione glanced up in surprise, uncertainty flickering momentarily across her face before she nodded. "Sure."

"Do you want to go back to the Order?"

Hermione paused. A second or two ticked by before she slowly got to her feet, setting the gauze aside on the table.

"I-I don't know, Luna."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly?" Hermione echoed, a faint smile flitting across her lips. "Honestly - no," she admitted, settling down on the bed beside Luna. "I-I want to stay here with the others."

"But what about Harry and Ron? They

really miss you, Hermione."

"If - if Draco decides to defect to the Order - then I'll go with him," she replied instead. She hastily picked up her wand and the tray empty phials, heading out of the room before Luna could ask another question. "Have a good rest, Luna."

"Thanks, 'Mione."

It wasn't until Hermione had firmly shut the door to Luna's room when she finally allowed herself to take a deep, shuddering breath. Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley missed her. They still remembered her. But just thinking about them made her head ache painfully, and the guilt she felt towards not being able to remember them was crushing.

She headed back into Draco's room, her worries quickly dissipating when she saw Draco on the telephone. He spotted her immediately and said a quick goodbye before hanging up the phone.

"Was that Andromeda?"

He nodded and approached her with something akin to caution. "Granger - " his voice was low and guarded, " - we're going to defect."

Hermione felt the oxygen rush out of her lungs. "All of us?"

"It's - " and Draco closed his eyes briefly, like the words were too difficult to say, and when he opened them again, they were almost obsidian. " - it's too difficult to go our separate ways. Much as Theo and I wouldn't like to, Pansy and

Blaise are fucking set on it. But as for you," he swallowed, "you don't have to join us, Granger. I called Andromeda, and she says it's okay for you to stay with her - "

"Wait," Hermione's throat felt strangely dry. "You - you don't want me to go with you?"

"No, it's not that." Draco returned quickly. "It's just going to be dangerous. This apartment has to be destroyed, and we're going to have to camp out somewhere in Godric's Hollow. I need you to be safe, Granger."

Hermione allowed a soft smile to curve her lips as she walked over to him. And when she slid her arms around his waist, he quickly wrapped his around her

shoulders, pulling her close. "I told you before," she whispered, knowing that her voice was barely loud enough for him to hear, "I feel safest with you."

He didn't reply for a long while, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet. "Together, then?"

Her smile widened. "Together."

The first time Hermione properly went into the inventory was also the last time she ever saw it. It was on one of those lazy afternoons where Draco was out on a mission, while Blaise and Theo were

getting more supplies from the Black Market. Luna was resting in the living room, and Pansy had asked Hermione if she'd help her clear out the inventory.

Moving seemed hardest on Pansy, who was clearly given to sentimentality despite her tough shell, and she was the most reluctant to go.

"I know I should say that time flies," Pansy said, as she carried down the racks of phials for them to sort out, "but honestly, these three years have felt like three lifetimes. Maybe that's why I'm not ready to leave this place."

Hermione smiled. "I've only lived here for several months and - and I'm still not ready to leave either."

Pansy looked around the room and

stifled a sigh. "It kind of grows on you, doesn't it?" Hermione nodded, and Pansy sat down cross-legged on the floor, letting her lips curl in a nostalgic smile. "I remember when we moved into this apartment - we honestly thought that we wouldn't survive a week living together."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We were so different, you see. Draco thought we were all a lost cause, I thought Theo was an immature wank, and Blaise thought I was a bitch - " Hermione's eyebrows shot up and Pansy shook her head in mirth. " - can't blame him; I guess I tend to give off that vibe."

"No, you don't."

"Sure I do. You hated me back during

Hogwarts days, remember?" Pansy shot her a pointed look and Hermione blushed.

"I-I do apologise - "

"No, it's fine. I thought you were insufferable too," Pansy grinned, before returning her attention back to the phials, keeping the empty ones in a different bag. "Anyway, this apartment was originally Draco's. He'd been living here alone after the Dark Lord took over the Malfoy Manor. But Theo'd crash here often because his Dad had died and he lived alone too, and after Draco - " she paused briefly, a sudden, pained expression crossing her features fleetingly, " - after Draco helped me, I moved in. Blaise was the last. And when

Blaise moved in, that's when Draco started 17-65."

Hermione's mind was reeling. She hadn't realised that Theo's father had died, or that this was originally Draco's apartment. It was fascinating that all three of the Slytherins came together because of Draco and that he was the one who had begun it all.

Pansy let a tiny smile curve her lips. "Sometimes, when we're all together, having a stupid meal or just talking, I forget that we're fighting a war. I just let myself spiral back to the past and for a moment or two, it seems like we're back in the Slytherin dungeon, and Theo's making some idiotic comment, and Blaise is being his usual prim and

proper self, and Draco's being utterly arrogant and condescending."

Hermione smiled to herself. Draco being arrogant and condescending was not something she'd heard of for the first time. In fact, she'd had first-hand experience of it.

"I knew that I was in love with Blaise when I saw him sorting out memory phials in this room," Pansy continued, her eyes softening as she glanced round the room.

"Really?"

"It was two years ago. And we were talking about the war and how much we wanted it to end - and it all just fell into place. But Blaise and I - we had the same goals, the same reason to fight, the

same reason to live each day like it's our last. And I think that in a war, that's a good enough reason as any to fall in love."

"I thought you were together for the sex," came a familiar voice by the doorway. "I didn't know you were in love."

Hermione and Pansy immediately whirled round, and Pansy glared when she realised that Theo was leaning against the frame of the door, watching them in thinly-veiled amusement.

"Frankly," Pansy began dryly, "if I was really in it for the sex, don't you think I would've picked Draco instead - " But she stopped abruptly when someone else stepped up next to Theo, her mouth falling open in surprise. "Hey, baby, I

didn't realise you were - "

"You know," Blaise cut her off, sounding thoroughly bemused. "I should be offended, but you're right."

"What?" Theo frowned. "Why am I not the best one at sex?"

And Pansy groaned loudly when Draco came into view, a knowing glint in his eye. "Because the walls are bloody thin, remember?" He smirked at Theo, "you hit all time low records with - "

"That was one time!" Theo yelled, shooting a horrified glance at Hermione and Pansy, both of whom were staring at him with blatant curiosity. "It's not even counted!"

"It is when the girl came out of the room laughing," Blaise pointed out.

"Oh, I remember that," Pansy chimed in, her lips stretched wide in a mocking grin. "The girl tried to get Draco to shag her right after that - "

"Which I didn't," Draco interrupted adamantly, and Pansy's eyes gleamed when she saw Draco shoot a brief wary glance at Hermione, "I didn't."

But Hermione was far too fascinated by the conversation to even notice, and a moment later, she was staring up at Theo with a rarely-seen teasing glint in her eyes. "So - what was the all time low record, Theo?"

"One fucking hour and - "

"It was thirty seconds," Blaise said, laughing when Theo yelled in horror, "because that's how long we heard the

bed squeaking."

"We were on the floor for most of it - "

"Sure, Theo, whatever helps you sleep at night."

"Fuck you, Blaise."

Draco smirked. "With your record? I don't think Blaise would want to."

Hermione let a giggle slip past her lips as the other three Slytherins laughed, but quickly sobered up when she saw Theo blush bright red. She climbed to her feet, heading straight for the paper bag in Theo's hand. "Did you get the apples?"

Theo stopped scowling as his eyes lit up. "Yeah," he grinned and grabbed an apple from the bag, tossing it to her. "Come on."

Blaise's eyes narrowed as he watched

the two of them head off to the living room. "Are you two going to play the stupid apple game again?"

"It's not stupid," Theo called over his shoulder. "Heads' up, Loony," he tossed another apple to the blond-haired witch sitting on the sofa. "You up for a game?"

"Like quidditch?"

"Fuck no."

"Oh, then alright," Luna smiled and climbed to her feet. "I was never particularly good at quidditch anyway."

"Yeah, count me in too," Pansy said, as she and Blaise took their positions next to Theo. "Hogwarts should've had this game. It's far more exciting than quidditch."

Draco's lips curled into a smirk as he

watched them from the other end of the room. "You're just saying that because you're fucking shite at quidditch," he drawled, "all of you were. Yes, you too, Granger," he added teasingly, when Hermione shot him a questioning look. "You couldn't even stay on a bloody broom."

She rolled her eyes, even as a reluctant smile tugged at her lips. "Grab an apple and get over here, Draco."

He raised his eyebrows at her unexpected command. But when her smile widened, he gave up and went to her, catching the apple Theo threw at him along the way.

The apartment seemed like a foreign place altogether when the day came for them to leave. Theo was the last to finish packing, which wasn't that much of a surprise, and the others were waiting in the living room with their bags as Draco helped Theo with the last of his things, while Hermione was still back in Draco's room.

"So, Luna," Blaise said, as he and Pansy sat on the sofa next to the blond-haired witch. "Are you excited to go back to the Order?"

Luna smiled. "Very. I'll miss this place, though. I quite like it; although I do miss

the Moon Frogs back at the Order's base too."

Pansy shot her a strange look, but quickly dismissed that as one of Luna's many peculiarities. She laced her fingers through Blaise's, leaning her head against his shoulder. "I can't believe we're going to destroy this place."

"I know," Blaise replied rather absentmindedly, before reaching for one of the bags on the floor. "You know what? We should take a picture together."

Pansy grinned at him. "Oh, brilliant idea. Hermione?" She called, looking over at the shut door of Draco's room. "Are you ready?"

"Almost!"

Hermione's voice was muffled from inside the room. After a few minutes, the door opened and she stepped out; looking almost shy and hesitant in a red coat that Pansy had earlier Transfigured for her.

She picked anxiously at the hem of her coat sleeve and glanced over at them. "How - how do I look?"

"Disturbingly Gryffindor," came Theo's voice as he stepped out of his room, grunting as he lugged a huge bag that seemed twice his weight. Draco followed him, casting a quick extension charm on the bag to lighten its weight and shrink its size.

"Thanks, mate," Theo said, before turning back to Hermione. "Yeah, we're

not going to have a Gryffindor-pride parade along the streets - I forbid it." He pointed his wand at her. "Colovaria."

Immediately, Hermione's coat darkened to an obscure shade of emerald green. She laughed, thoroughly fascinated by yet another spell, but Pansy rolled her eyes. "Yes, and now we have a Slytherin-pride parade on the streets."

"Better than a fucking Gryffindor one," Theo grinned, before turning to Blaise. "By the way, what was that I heard about taking a bloody picture? You know I hate taking pictures."

"Only because you look fucking ugly in them," Draco commented dryly, raising his eyebrows when Hermione sent a disapproving frown his way. "What? He

does!"

"It's true. I do. But at least I don't look fucking ugly all the time like the rest of you," Theo added wickedly.

Hardly fazed, Blaise got up with his camera in hand. "Mm, well, at least I can last longer than thirty seconds."

Pansy's hand immediately shot up. "I can vouch for that!"

Theo scowled as Blaise gave him a triumphant smirk. With his wand, Blaise hovered the camera in mid-air and waved the others over. "Come on, let's take a picture."

Hermione went over to help Luna up, but the girl didn't need any. Her splinched wound had healed wonderfully over the past few days, and she no longer walked

with a limp. Careful not to disturb the group's dynamics, Luna made sure that she stood at the side next to Hermione, who was next to Draco, who was next to Pansy, who was next to Blaise. Only Theo stood at the other end of the room, glaring at them and adamantly refusing to come over.

"Theo!" Pansy rolled her eyes as he continued to stand there unmoving. "Get your arse over here right now!"

"No, nothing you say can - "

"Theo," Hermione's voice was soft and pleading. "It's our last day here."

He stared at her for a moment, his firm resolve slowly ebbing away and, after awhile, he sighed in defeat and walked over to her. "Fine."

Hermione's smile widened and she pulled Luna closer to her so that Theo could stand on the Luna's other side. She slipped her hand through Draco's, and he shot her a brief glance, his lips curling into a half-smirk.

And as she stared into the camera and smiled, she thought about all the months she'd spent with the four Slytherins in the apartment, and how it was the happiest she'd been in the past three years.

Somehow, it made all the bad things that had happen worth it. And she wished for nothing to ever change.

Draco and Hermione were the last to leave the house.

The others had headed down the stairs first, with their bags in tow. Pansy, in particular, had wanted to leave because she couldn't bear the thought of seeing the apartment destroyed. And even Theo, who claimed to have no sentiment whatsoever, looked a little choked up when he glanced around the place for one last time.

Hermione understood why they felt that way. It was their home, and in a war, there weren't many places you could actually call home.

And if the war ever ended - then what next? This was no longer a place they

could come back to.

She waited for Draco in the living room as he destroyed the furniture in the other rooms one by one. And she realised that this was possibly hitting Draco the hardest, because this was his real home, a place where he'd lived in long before any of them ever did.

Draco finally came out of their room, his face impassive as usual as he walked up to her. She took a deep breath, looking around the living room and trying to memorise the days they'd spent in this place.

She remembered the earliest days. Her countless nightmares. She remembered getting better. Leaving the room for the first time. Learning about 17-65.

Meeting Luna. Telephone calls with Andromeda. Afternoon talks with Pansy. Learning healing spells from Blaise. Playing Theo's apple game. Spending Christmas with the Slytherins.

And Draco. Every single bit of her memory of this place involved Draco. Draco helping her that first night and promising to keep her safe. Waiting for Draco to return. Healing Draco when he was hurt. Draco keeping his distance. Draco kissing her for the first time. Kissing Draco for the second time. Talking to him, listening to him, staring into the silence with him.

She wasn't sad about leaving this place behind, not really.

She was sad about leaving the memories

of the people in this place behind.

"Granger?" Draco's voice interrupted her thoughts, and she glanced up at him. He was staring at her with a vaguely concerned expression. "You alright?"

She smiled faintly. "Do you think we could come back to see this place? After the war?"

His gaze darkened into something unreadable. "We?"

"Yes," she frowned. "You and me. Unless you don't want to - "

But the words had barely left her lips when he lowered his head and kissed her. He nipped at her lips in a familiarity that made her stomach tighten with delicious pleasure, and she pushed herself up on the tips of her toes, looping

her arms around his neck to pull him closer. Her unexpected eagerness wrenched a low groan from him, and he kissed her harder, his lips demanding and fervent on hers in a way that was both mind-numbing and electrifying all at once.

Hermione thought if there was another memory she'd like to add to her collection - it was this. Draco Malfoy kissing her in an empty apartment like nothing else mattered at that moment but them.

He finally dragged away; his lips flushed red and eyes liquid silver. And then he smiled, one of his rare, soft smiles that made her heart stutter. "We should go."

She nodded and fell a step back. He picked up their bags, setting it by the doorway and signalling for her to wait while he demolished the last of the house - the living room. She didn't watch. She couldn't bear to. So instead she heard the faint sounds of things being crushed and obliterated, and when Draco stepped out, the tip of his wand was singed red.

"Is it gone?" she breathed, wondering why the thought of there not being a home any longer left a gnawing hole inside of her.

"Not quite," he drew out the telephone that he'd hidden behind him. Her eyes lit up. "Thought you might like that, even though your little muggle invention's

quite useless now."

Hermione smiled and quickly opened her bag, stuffing the telephone in along with her other muggle books and stolen jumpers from Draco. She picked up her bag, slinging it on her shoulders, along with the other bag of healing potions that Blaise and Pansy had given her for Christmas. The wand Theo had found for her was safely in the pocket of her coat. She followed Draco out, but when she found herself near the stairwell, she paused. A part of her suddenly registered that this was the first time she was ever going to leave the apartment. The thought of going outside was exciting, but for the most part it was terrifying.

Draco seemed to sense that she hadn't moved and he turned, his expression softening when he noticed the fear in her eyes. He wanted to make a teasing remark, but he bit it back and held out his hand instead.

"Ready?"

She smiled, her fears slowly dissipating when she remembered that she'd always felt safest with him, and took his hand.

26 | confringo

26

c o n f r i n g o

Blasting spell.

The safe-house that Andromeda had prepared for them was in Godric's Hollow, a place that was now in devastating shambles. The Death-Eaters had destroyed most of the houses in the area, and Draco remembered it clearly because it was one of the first places that had been properly captured after

saint Potter and the bloody Order had lost the war.

"Some say this place is haunted," Luna was saying, as the six of them trudged along the empty street. "And you might want to be careful with the ghosts you see here. I don't think all of them are particularly nice."

"So let me get something straight here," Theo interjected, "you're saying that you'd befriend the ghosts if they were fucking nice?"

"Of course. Most ghosts are just lonely and I think they'd like a friend."

Hermione chuckled under her breath as she heard the conversation in front. Blaise was the one leading the group, while she and Draco lingered behind.

She was thoroughly fascinated as Draco covered up their footprints with the same spell over and over, and made sure to leave deeper imprints each time she took a step forward.

Draco soon noticed and shot her an irritated look, to which she simply grinned. "Never played in the snow before, Malfoy?"

He raised his eyebrows at her unexpected use of his surname, but didn't question it. "If you mean making footprints in the bloody snow just for the fun of it - then no."

She looked up at him, noticing for a brief moment how he seemed to fit in perfectly with the snowy landscape. Her eyes flickered momentarily to his lips

and she thought about the delightful, hungry way he'd kissed her earlier. An involuntary shiver raced down her spine and it wasn't because of the cold.

"Granger," he said, with thinly-veiled amusement in his tone as he clearly noticed the way she was looking at him, "you're staring."

Hermione blushed and trudged on, trying to stop her heart from racing when he placed a gentle hand against the small of her back. She wasn't so sure if the gesture was just to guide her - the road ahead was flat and not quite slippery; she didn't need much guiding to begin with.

They soon arrived at the safehouse - a dilapidated building that seemed steady

enough to have survived the worst of the war. Draco made Hermione wait outside with Luna, while he and Theo headed inside first to scout round the place.

Blaise was placing careful charms to conceal the building from the outside, and Pansy left him eventually, wandering over to Hermione and Luna. She gazed round at their surroundings before casting a disillusionment charm over the three of them. "It's awfully quiet," she murmured, "too quiet."

Hermione couldn't agree more. There was nothing as frightening as the calm before the storm, and the louder the silence, the more deadly the consequence. She took an instinctive step closer to Pansy, who automatically

slipped her arm through Hermione's. After what seemed like forever, Draco stepped out, eyes narrowing when the front porch seemed empty. He seemed to know it wasn't, however, and quickly cast a spell on the group to remove the charm. "Come on," he said, gesturing them inside with a quick nod of his head. "It's safe."

Safe.

Hermione didn't think she could ever hear that word enough. She let the others hurry inside before going in herself, slipping her fingers through Draco's as she passed him by the doorway.

But he didn't seem willing to let her go. After he'd shut the door, he pulled her close, resting his hands gently on her

hips and staring down at her with unfiltered concern in his eyes. "You alright?"

He was here, wasn't he? She pushed herself up on the tips of her toes, pressing her lips dangerously close to his, her smile widening when he let out a low sound from the back of his throat. "I've never been better."

It was time to make this new place their temporary home. After Draco had left with Theo to gather some supplies from the Black Market, Hermione found

herself wandering around to familiarise herself with the place.

Blaise was still outside, casting additional protection spells on the house, while Pansy sat on the front porch, her eyes alert as she scanned the surroundings for any rogue activities nearby. One could never be too careful at a time like this, and the four Slytherins had already agreed taking turns to guard the place.

Luna was resting in the living room, the long walk clearly having taken a toll on her leg. After Hermione had checked on Luna's faded injury, she wandered around the other rooms, casting a quick Scourgify every so often to clean the place. There was rust and dust almost

everywhere, and her nose wrinkled at the smell of mildew that seemed to cluster every nook and cranny.

Rounding a corner, she paused when she stepped into the kitchen. Something seemed familiar, too familiar. She inhaled shakily, but the oxygen was non-existent and she felt her heart hammer against her chest as bile rose up in her throat.

This place wasn't safe. She knew this place like the back of her hand, and it wasn't safe. Feeling a surge of terror engulf her, she fell a step back, glancing around with wide eyes and feeling her skin crawl. Crawl? No.

Slither.

And it all came back in flashes then. And

her head hurt, Merlin, it hurt.

Her mind conjured up shadows, of an empty, broken house. Creaky stairs. Stained walls. Silence and then screaming. It was fear of the worst kind, the deadly kind. A woman, more dead than living, and what was her name again - Bathilda Bagshot. And from the darkness, from the shadows - there it was, hissing, slithering towards her, closer, closer, closer -

A snake.

Nagini.

Somewhere in the farthest recesses of her mind, Hermione imagined she heard screaming. It wasn't until she heard the patters of feet becoming louder when she realised that she was the one screaming.

She saw Blaise in her peripheral vision, followed by Pansy and Luna, matching looks of horror on their faces.

But they were blocked by a terrifying vision of the bloody snake - was it even real? - and Hermione screamed when the snake lashed out towards her. She slammed herself back against the wall, feeling her back collide against something metal and sharp, but she didn't care. She had to get away, they all had to get away.

"Hermione!" It was Pansy, but Hermione shrieked as she felt something grip her tightly. Merlin, no, the snake had finally wrapped itself around her and she was about to be choked to death. "Hermione, snap out of it! You're having a panic

attack!"

"Pansy, get away from her - "

"No, Blaise, you have to hold her. Luna, give me a hand - "

And Hermione screamed even louder when she felt something else grip her other arm. She was trapped, she was dying, and where was Draco when she needed him? Merlin, Draco was going to be killed by Nagini too. Her eyes widened and she whipped out her wand from her coat, holding it out protectively in front of her as she scanned her surroundings, because where was Draco, where was Draco, where was -

"Hermione, stop struggling!"

"Pansy, just step away from her, you're making it worse - "

But the grip on her arms tightened and suddenly, Nagini was right in front of her again, mouth wide and teeth bared and aiming right at her.

Kill or be killed?

Hermione didn't miss a beat.

"Confringo!"

A jet of orange light shot out from the wand and the dining table exploded in a burst of flames. She heard muffled shouts and swears from the others, but Nagini was still here, and Hermione sobbed hysterically as she aimed her wand again at the bloody snake.

"Confrin - "

Only this time, the spell never left her lips as something clamped down so hard on her mouth she could hardly breathe.

"Get Draco!" She registered Blaise shouting in the background. "Pansy, extinguish the fire and light the phials - Luna, I need a silencing charm everywhere, and the calming potion...it's in Hermione's bag! Hurry up, I can't hold her for long - "

Hermione bit him. Blaise swore, falling off balance for a moment as she shoved him with all her might and continued screaming, holding her wand out in front of her again.

"Hurry up!" Blaise roared, throwing himself out of the way as Hermione blindly aimed and fired another blasting curse his way, this time obliterating two chairs completely. In another situation, perhaps, he'd pause to admire how

proficient she could really be at magic. Because it turned out that when pushed to her limits, Hermione Granger could actually aim to kill.

Blaise swore on Salazar's grave that he hadn't even taught her that bloody blasting spell.

Luna raced back with the calming potions, muttering muffling charms under her breath to keep Hermione's screams from waking the whole neighbourhood. "What's wrong with your hand?" She asked Blaise, who simply shot her a dismissive look.

"She bit me. Take away her bloody wand."

But the moment Luna reached for it, Hermione screamed even harder, her

voice muffled by Blaise's hand pressed firmly over her mouth. She shot another spell - a silent one, when had she even learnt silent magic? - and Luna barely evaded it, the ends of her blonde hair getting singed in the process.

"Shit," Blaise swore again as Hermione thrashed in his grip. "Pansy, where the hell is Draco?"

"I just called him!" Pansy yelled, running back into the kitchen with her face flushed and the expression on her face distressed. She hastily put out the new burst of flames that Hermione had sent hurtling near the kitchen cabinets. "Baby, just get away from her, she's not safe!"

"And leave her to blow up the rest of the bloody building?"

"Better than getting yourself blown up! Careful, Luna!" Pansy grabbed the blonde witch away, and aimed her wand at Hermione. "I'm going to stun her, just give me - "

"What the hell is going on?"

Pansy whirled around, relief surging through her when she saw Draco and Theo striding through the hallway, their faces taught with apprehension. Draco tried to keep his expression steeled as he heard Hermione's muffled screams. But the moment he rounded the corner and saw the hysterical girl on the kitchen floor, he felt the oxygen leave his lungs. She looked far worse than she had the night he found her. Physically, she seemed fine, but he knew that her

psychological state was strained far more than it could handle. He inhaled sharply, wondering if this was how she had been when the Peverells tortured her for three whole years.

"Fuck." He swore under his breath before waving the others out of the room, including Blaise, who quickly let go of Hermione. Ignoring their advice to be careful, he stood by the doorway, taking a deep breath and forcing himself to stay calm. "Granger."

Hermione paused, her wand poised in mid-air as the scream froze on her lips. Her eyes were still glazed, her chest rising and falling with sobbing breaths, but she had heard him and that was a good enough sign.

He took several steps closer to her before dropping to his knees barely a few feet away from her. "Hermione, it's me."

And yes, there it was - a flicker of resignation at the sound of his voice. She lowered her wand. After what seemed like forever, she blinked, her eyes slowly swivelling and latching onto him. He almost buckled at the brokenness in them.

"Draco?"

He exhaled at the sound of his name on her lips, finally daring to reach out a tentative hand to her. "Yes, it's me," he said calmly, trying not to react when unfiltered relief replaced her terrified expression. "You're safe now,

Hermione."

Her breathing was uneven as shakily reached for him with slow, measured movements. It wasn't until he had gripped her hand firmly when she finally seemed to react to his touch, leaning towards him and allowing his arms to wrap around her tightly.

"I-I - " She choked out, burying her face against his neck. "I didn't mean to - " and then she trailed off, hardly able to say another word as she broke down into another fit of desperate sobbing, clinging to him like he was her only lifeline.

He didn't reply; simply pressed his lips gently to her forehead and held her through the aftermath.

"Draco? Are you awake?"

Hermione's voice broke the three-hour silence that had elapsed since her earlier breakdown. After she'd collapsed into his arms, he'd brought her out of the kitchen and into the closest bedrooms, laying her down gently on the bed and keeping his arms wound round her tightly as he settled down beside her.

They hadn't moved since. She hadn't even uttered a word, and apart from the occasional snuffle or sob, no other sound had escaped her lips.

To say he was worried would be an

understatement. Truth be told, he was fucking terrified, because it almost seemed like she had spiralled back into a shell of herself, the way she had been when he first found her. A part of him wanted to whisk her away to Andromeda's where he knew she'd be safe, but another part of him knew that it wasn't about what he wanted.

It was about what she wanted, and if Hermione Granger wanted to stay by his side and fight, then he was going to respect her decision.

Though he'd be damned if he let anything happen to her.

He shifted slightly now, pulling back a little so he could get a better look at her. Her cheeks were still tear-stained, and

her fingers still gripped his tightly.

"Yeah," Draco answered in response to her question, trying to maintain a calm expression when Hermione turned in his arms so that she was now face to face with him on the pillow. Their lips were a hairsbreadth away, and it was taking all his willpower to keep his eyes focused on hers and not stray any lower.

"I didn't mean to break down," she said, with such a huge measure of apology in her voice that he instinctively reached up to draw his thumb swiftly against her cheek.

"Not your fault, Granger," he assured her.

"This place brings back bad memories. I think I've been here before, you see," she

explained, and he froze, completely taken aback by her revelation.

"You've been to Godric's Hollow?"

"I think so. I don't remember why I came here or who I came here with. But I do remember battling a huge snake. Nagini," she added, her breath halting as though the memory of it pained her. "That was the name of the snake."

Draco lifted his head to look down at the brown-haired witch in his arms. "Nagini?" He repeated, feeling a sudden chill shoot down his spine as he remembered the Dark Lord's beastly creature, the way the snake had sunk its teeth into one of his professors back at the Malfoy Manor three years ago. The memory was vivid and revolting, and he

instinctively tightened his grip on Hermione.

His action didn't go unnoticed, and Hermione eyes gradually widened. "Yes," a frown glossed her face as she took in his tight expression, "did I say something wrong?"

"No," he hastily shook his head to assuage her fears. "It's just - remember that snake I told you about some time ago? The one that Neville Longbottom killed?"

Her eyes grew wide. "That's the one?"

"The one and only. Nagini belonged to the Dark Lord. He was furious when he lost her."

"I see," the relief in Hermione's voice was unmistakable, and Draco belatedly

realised that she hadn't known that Nagini was dead. No, she'd forgotten that the snake was dead - that seemed more like it. "Well, I think Neville's very brave."

Draco made a reluctant noise, one that wasn't so much of an agreement as it was a note of dismissiveness. He knew that killing the Dark Lord's snake had to be one of the greatest accomplishments anyone had ever achieved in the entire history of the Wizarding world, but he'd rather keel over than admit that.

The bottomline was that Neville Longbottom was still a bloody git - courageous, of course, but still a git. Just because Draco liked Hermione didn't change the way he viewed those friends

of hers.

And while he was on the subject of her friends, his thoughts drifted to the Weasel and he found himself automatically frowning. If all went well, they would defect to the Order within the next few days. The Golden Trio would be united once more, and Hermione - His chest constricted.

These were dangerous waters he was treading, and the more he thought about it, the more he found himself questioning everything that he had begun to believe in.

It wasn't until he felt familiar fingers lace through his when he pushed aside his thoughts and focused on Hermione. It dawned on him that she was saying

something and he blinked. "What?"

A fleeting look of amusement flashed in her eyes before it faded, her lips curving up in a fond smile as she stared at him.

"I said - will you stay with me tonight?" She asked, haltingly, a tinge of anxiety in her voice as though she was worried he'd say no. "I don't want to be alone in this place."

"Of course." He didn't even hesitate as he draped an arm loosely around her waist, pulling her in close so that their legs were tangled under the covers, her head tucked under his chin and her fingers gripping the hem of his shirt tightly. "Sleep, Granger."

And the way she smiled against his chest swiftly cast aside any doubts he had, at

least for moment.

"Goodnight, Draco."

Hermione woke up the next morning to find that the other half of the bed was empty. She felt a sudden surge of panic, but it was quickly quelled when she spotted the familiar bags by the wardrobe. Two of them were hers; the other three belonged to Draco - which meant that he had shifted their belongings into the room.

After retrieving an arbitrary set of clothes, a towel, a toothbrush and her

wand, she ran a quick hand through her hair in a feeble attempt to tame her wild curls. It didn't make a difference, as usual, which hardly bothered her by now.

The moment she stepped out of the room, the five people in the kitchen immediately turned to her. She paused like a deer caught in headlights before attempting a faint smile. Only Draco seemed calm as ever. Theo's lips were pulled up in a tiny grin by way of greeting, but Pansy, Blaise and Luna were staring at her in blatant concern, clearly remembering her breakdown from the day before.

Draco was the first to ease the tension in the room. Pushing back his chair with a

rough scrape, he strode quickly over to her. "Bathroom's over there," he gestured to the door down the decrepit hallway that was past the kitchen.

Hermione faltered, remembering the familiar corners of the place and fighting the chill that raced down her spine. She took a deep, unsteady breath and walked towards the bathroom. The interior was surprisingly clean. Blaise had probably Scourgified the place a little - it seemed far better than its rusty state the day before.

But it was still filled with ghosts of the past. And as she flicked a brief glance over her shoulder and saw the dark hallway, she felt her breath grow shallow. That snake, that bloody snake

still haunted her.

"Granger," Draco's voice pulled her back to reality. He was standing slightly behind her, his eyebrows knitted as he saw her hovering by the doorway. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, fine," she threw an unsure glance at the bathroom, feeling her throat tighten at the confined space within. If she had a panic attack in there and imagined Nagini launching its unhinged jaws right into her face, she was certain that she'd blast this place into oblivion. "I just - "

"Do you need me to wait outside?"

She bit her lip, glancing over her shoulder at the bathroom and back at him again. "If it's not too much to ask, could you - " she let her sentence trail off,

hardly able to finish off her bold request. But the implication of her words was clear, and his eyebrows shot up. "Granger, you are aware that there's no shower curtain inside, right?" His lips were tugged up in a brief smirk, his eyes gleaming with thinly-veiled amusement. "It'll be just like that night you found me!" She pleaded, in spite of the blush colouring her cheeks. "You could keep your back turned and not look." "You're asking a hell lot from me," he grumbled, but stepped into the bathroom with her nonetheless, locking the door behind simply with a wave of his hand. Then they found themselves faced with a new problem when they saw the full-length mirror against the wall, large

enough to reflect Hermione if she stood under the shower.

Hermione didn't miss the flicker of realisation that bloomed on Draco's face. And before she knew it, she was picking up her wand and pointing it at him.

"Obscuro."

A blindfold immediately materialised and wrapped itself tightly around his head. Hermione stepped back in satisfaction, placing her new change of clothes down on the sink. "I will punch you if you remove that," she warned him, even though it was difficult to keep a straight face. "And you know I have a mean right hook."

"Violence and a blindfold?" Draco

shook his head, still sounding thoroughly entertained, "you've clearly been led astray by Slytherins."

Now Hermione laughed, and she quickly manoeuvred him so that he had a proper seat on the counter beside the sink. She reached up to smooth the blindfold over his eyes, just in case, before acting on impulse and pressing a brief kiss to his cheek.

"Thank you for being here," she said quickly, feeling her stomach tighten deliciously when he let out a low sound from the back of his throat, as though having her so close was both delightful and agonising to him.

Pushing that thought aside, she quickly discarded her clothes and stepped under

the shower. She turned on the tap, a shriek escaping her lips when she found herself drowned by a heavy torrent of ice-cold water.

"Merlin's sake, it's freezing," she gasped, reaching out to grab her wand. But she didn't have to. A second later, she found that the water cascading down had heated up to a nice, warm temperature. She didn't have to look to know that Draco had warmed the water with magic, and a dulcet sigh escaped her as she felt the prickles on her skin ease off with the comfortable temperature.

A second sigh of content had just left her when she found herself unable to make a noise. She threw a glance over at Draco,

only to see him still sitting there with the blindfold over his eyes. But a wand was directed at her, a half-distracted, half-aggravated look on his face.

He'd hit her with a Silencio.

"If I'm not allowed to see anything, you're not allowed to make sounds that'll fuck around with my head," he said flatly, "now hurry up and finish your bath, Granger."

Hermione laughed silently and reached over for the shampoo to lather up her hair. Things had just taken a turn for the interesting.

The kitchen was emptied out by the time Draco and Hermione emerged from the bathroom. Hermione heard a distant chatter of voices from the rooms upstairs which she quickly identified as Pansy, Blaise and Luna. Theo was out on the front porch, keeping a lookout and staying alert on his shift.

Hermione quickly located her breakfast, a plate of scrambled eggs and an English muffin that Blaise had set aside for her. Draco's food was half-eaten, and after he cast a quick heating spell on their plates, they settled down to eat.

Hermione was happy to eat in a comfortable silence with Draco, who seemed content to do the same. But

Pansy's excited voice, along with Blaise's and Luna's, drifted down occasionally, increasing in volume as Luna talked about the Order and the other two Slytherins asked eager questions.

Hermione couldn't help but feel rather uneasy as she overheard their conversation. A warm, comforting hand gripped her knee tightly under the table and she glanced at Draco beside her, who was still chewing on his food stoically, a calm expression on his face.

"I can muffle your ears for you if you want," he offered, once he'd swallowed the mouthful of food. "You don't have to listen to them."

"It's not that," she hedged briefly, before

dropping her fork and shifting in her seat so that she was facing him. "Can I tell you something?"

"Go ahead."

She took a deep breath. "After that little episode yesterday, I've found that I'm scared, Draco. Terribly frightened. And - and if a snake can cause me to break down, I don't know what else will - "

Her words were cut off when Draco swivelled round in his seat. His action forced her knees between his, and she somehow felt protected in that position. Her hands automatically reached for his and he intertwined his fingers with hers easily.

"Granger, before you start diminishing your self-worth, let me cut you off

there," he said evenly, looking at her with all the seriousness in the world. "Nagini wasn't just a snake. That bloody creature was un-killable. Believe me - I've seen what she could do. It's absolutely normal to feel scared. I mean, fuck, Granger, when I first joined the Dark Lord's inner circle," he paused, a fleeting look of pain flashing in his eyes so briefly she almost missed it. "That snake scared the hell out of me. I couldn't even look that bloody thing in the eye. She was - she wasn't normal."

Hermione frowned, suddenly remembering what Draco had said a long time ago about Neville Longbottom. "She was a - " what was that word again? " - a Horcrux?"

Draco's eyes widened. "How did you - "
"You told me, remember? When I first asked you about Neville?"

"Oh," the stormy expression in Draco's eyes seemed to clear. "Right. You're right, Nagini was a Horcrux and she couldn't be killed unless she was stabbed by a special weapon. I'll tell you more about that someday, Granger."

Hermione smiled briefly; glad that she could at least remember all the events that happened post-capture, when Draco had found her. It thrilled her to realise that she never quite forgot any of her days spent with the Slytherins.

But then her smile faded as she thought about the matter at hand, and her grip on Draco's fingers tightened. "The thing is,"

she said haltingly, "I'm not sure if I can join the Order and fight alongside them. I'm not even sure if I want to."

He stared at her silently, clearly surprised by her confession.

"All the fight has gone out of me, Draco," she continued, shaking her head wearily as a forlorn sigh spilled from her lips. "I'm afraid I'm just not a tenacious Gryffindor anymore."

"That's because you've spent way too much time with us," came a familiar voice from behind her. Theo strode into the room, lifting out his hand and summoning an apple from nearby shelf. The fruit flew across the kitchen into his hand, and he took a hearty bite from it.

"You're one of us now," Theo added,

grinning at Hermione's confused expression. "A cowardly Slytherin. But you know, that's what keeps us alive during a war."

She raised her eyebrows and turned back to Draco, who had a smirk playing on his lips.

"Theo's right," Draco readily agreed. "Sometimes, clever cowardice supersedes dumb bravery."

"In other words, Slytherin trumps Gryffin-fucking-dor," Theo interjected merrily.

In spite of herself, Hermione couldn't help but let out a laugh. Theo casually waved over his shoulder as he headed back outside, the half-eaten apple in hand, and resumed his position on the

front porch.

Then the kitchen was silent again, and Hermione looked up at Draco. There was an unusually soft expression in his eyes as he gazed down at her, and she found herself having to catch her breath.

"You don't have to join the Order if you don't want to, Granger," he said simply, and she felt her lips tug up into a smile.

"Even though the four of us are defecting, and even if it all goes well - I don't think we'll ever properly be part of the Order. And, if you want, you can just stay with us."

Hermione instantly felt all the fears that weighed down on her dissipate. "I'm staying with you," she breathed quickly, her smile widening and eyes crinkling at

the corners as she stared up at him.
"Definitely. No questions asked."

27 | stupefy

2 7

s t u p e f y

Renders a victim unconscious.

The stay at Godric's Hollow proved to be easier than expected.

Despite the protection charms and shields placed on the house, Draco decided it was better to be safe than sorry. So the four Slytherins and Luna took turns to guard the house, with the more skilled duellers like Theo and Draco taking the night shifts.

Hermione knew better than to offer her

help - she doubted that she had it in her to hurt anyone, even a Death-Eater - but she liked accompanying the others on their shifts. She enjoyed spending time with Theo, who always made her laugh. Pansy and Blaise always had fascinating anecdotes to share, and Luna was the link to her past.

But she loved talking to Draco the most. She realised that, despite her strong memories of him, there were many other things she didn't know. Like the fact that his hatred for half-bloods was something that had been whipped into him for as long as he could remember.

"I saw a Muggle book once," he admitted, on one of the nights when they had broached the topic of his childhood.

"Got through half of it until my father found out. And he locked me in a room and starved me until I got that fact through my head - that reading Muggle books was a crime worse than using any of the Unforgivables."

It seemed like Draco's snobbery had been something instilled, rather than a trait he was born with. Hermione thought about how cruel and callous his father was, and about how kind her own father was.

At least, she thought her father was kind. For the millionth time, she wondered why she remembered nothing about her own parents. They were but a piece of the past, faceless figures that had provided her with a happy childhood

and faint but fond memories.

But the thoughts faded when she looked up at noticed the troubled expression on Draco's face. He was gazing into the distance, his eyes carefully blank and illuminated by the silver of the moon. She reached down to slide her fingers along the sleeve of his green jumper - the same one that she had knit for him. She noticed that all the Slytherins seemed to wear their respective ones whenever possible, as though the jumpers were part of a uniform that banded them all together.

After a slight moment of hesitation, she tugged up the sleeve of his jumper so that it exposed his Dark Mark. He quickly flinched away, as though the

thought of her touching that was absolutely unthinkable.

"What about that?" She asked softly, gripping him tightly so that he wouldn't completely pull away. "Were you forced into receiving it too?"

Draco swallowed. His silver eyes flickered to her momentarily, before he glanced away, staring unfocusedly into the distance. "Not exactly," he hedged, and she thought she heard a slight tremble in his voice. "It was - fuck, Granger, you need to understand that, for the longest time, it was all I ever wanted."

"Really?"

His eyes flew to hers. "Not the job description," he said, his tone edgy as

though he was pleading that she at least try to understand. "Or the fact that I'd have to serve the Dark Lord. It was just - the power, the prestige, the exclusivity - I guess. I thought I was continuing a fucking legacy. The next heir of the Malfoy family, now a Death-Eater, just like the rest of the family. It wasn't until I was standing in front of the Dark Lord, holding out my arm to him when I realised that it was the most fucked-up decision I'd ever made. And by then," his voice broke off, and Hermione automatically laced her fingers through his. "By then, it was too late."

Hermione thought of all the things she could say to comfort him. But she surmised that it wasn't going to do any

good. She could tell him how sorry she was, but it wasn't going to make the past or any of his mistakes disappear.

So, when she found nothing to say, she simply placed her head on his shoulder, smiling faintly when his arm instinctively wrapped around her waist, pulling her in close to him, so close until she swore she could hear the slow, steady thudding of his heartbeat; a constant reminder that in this war, amidst all the death surrounding them, he was still very much alive.

They stayed until Blaise came out for his shift. The sun had begun to rise in the far horizon, and Hermione belatedly realised how time seemed to become irrelevant when she was with Draco.

Draco seemed reluctant to head back inside, so Hermione accompanied him for a walk along the street. The neighbourhood was deathly silent as always, and they were inconspicuous in their dark, nondescript clothes, but Draco was careful to erase their footprints from the snow.

Hermione found herself coming to a halt when she passed a graveyard. Something about it screamed familiar, and she momentarily dropped Draco's hand to pick her way through the gravestones. It was as though a magnetic force field gravitated her down the narrow path, and she could hear Draco shuffling through the snow behind her.

"Granger," his voice was guarded,

almost wary, "is everything alright?"

"Yes, of course," she said, turning around to slide her fingers through his again. She didn't miss the way he avoided looking at the gravestones, as though he were terrified of chancing upon a name that might strike a chord in his memory. "I just - "

She trailed off as she turned, eyes widening when she saw something that made her breath catch in her throat. "Draco, look," she breathed, tugging him towards a particular gravestone. The gravestone was set in white marble, with the names James & Lily Potter engraved in a stately script. And, for a moment, Hermione felt a rush of déjà vu. She'd been here before. "Is that...?"

"Potter's parents," Draco replied calmly, taking a step closer to get a better look. Hermione shuffled closer and gently dropped to her knees, her eyes wide and curious as she studied the gravestone. Had she been here with Harry before? She couldn't quite remember, but she supposed she had. It made sense. She supposed that she'd had many things to say to Harry's parents when she last visited their grave. But this time, she had nothing. All she could think of was how sorry she was, that she'd forgotten their son, because she hadn't meant to. Taking a deep breath, she slowly pulled the scarf from her neck and used it to brush off the dust and snow that had gathered on the grave. She heard Draco

take a step closer. And then he held out his wand and conjured a wreath of lilies on the floor.

Hermione glanced up at him in surprise, smiling when he averted his gaze, as though the mere act of laying flowers on a grave was far too nice for a Death-Eater like him to do. She picked up the wreath and set it against the grave, before climbing to her feet and slotting her fingers between Draco's once more.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Draco's Dark Mark began to burn. He blinked, feeling rather disoriented as he stared into the darkness for a moment

or two. Then, feeling a familiar mop of wild, bushy hair under his chin, he realised that he was in Godric's Hollow, with Hermione in his arms.

There was something different about the burning in his arm this time, and he wondered if the time had come for the Order to attack. If this was it - the time for them to finally defect.

Reluctantly, he shook Hermione awake; watching as her eyes fluttered open slowly, slow recognition dawning on her face as she saw him. "Draco? What's wrong?"

"Hold on," he said lowly, dragging his arms away from her and climbing out of bed. He hastily pulled on his jacket, zipping it up tightly and summoning his

wand over. Striding over to the door, he yanked it open, realising that none of the others were outside. The house was silent - everyone else was still asleep.

"Draco?"

He whirled round, his chest tightening involuntarily as he saw Hermione slowly getting up, her eyes wide and frightened. "Listen," he murmured, holding out a hand to her. She immediately went to him, sliding her arms tightly around his waist. "The Dark Lord's summoning me. But I think it's a special mission, because none of the others are awake. If it's time to defect, I'll light the phials. Regardless of whether Blaise and Pansy's Dark Marks burn, regardless of where the Dark Lord

summons them to, they have to be at the Malfoy Manor, with the prisoners from the Order. The coordinates on the phial will be for Theo, not for them, because Theo and I will be defecting separately. Let them know that."

"Alright," she whispered, pushing herself up on the tips of her toes to press her lips against his cheek. "Be safe, Draco."

Gringotts was a flurry of chaos when Draco arrived. He heard Bellatrix's hysterical cackle of laughter before he registered anything else. To his horror, he saw members of the Order swooping

across the room on broomsticks, hurling hexes in every direction. He turned to the nearest Death-Eater - Goyle Senior - who was looking flustered as he sought refuge behind a pillar.

"What the fuck is this?" Draco snapped, striding swiftly towards the man. The Dark Lord was nowhere to be seen, and Draco quickly saw that only several Death-Eaters had been summoned.

"I was patrolling this place when the bloody Order launched an attack," Goyle Senior replied, brushing a hasty hand across his lips to wipe the blood that dribbled down to his chin. "So I called the Dark Lord immediately."

There was something incredibly abnormal about the situation. "On

Gringotts? Why would the Order attack Gringotts?"

"There's money here, obviously the bloody Order's in need of some."

No - no, that wasn't it. Draco didn't think highly of the stupid Order at all, but he knew that they were above robbing a bank. He ducked a hex that flew his way, before stepping closer to Goyle Senior.

"Where's the Dark Lord?"

"Over there."

Draco followed Goyle Senior's gaze. The Dark Lord stood with Dolohov at the end of the hall, killing off anyone who was unfortunate enough to cross paths with him.

Draco knew that the Order was fighting a losing battle - the number of Death-

Eaters here were less than ten and terribly outnumbered, but Death-Eaters like himself, Bellatrix and Dolohov were far more deadly than all the Order members combined, not to mention the Dark Lord himself.

So why would the Order send themselves on a death-trap mission?

Unless...this was supposed to be a death-trap mission all along.

Realisation suddenly dawned on Draco. It threw him off-focus for a moment, and he winced as he was hit in the leg by a stinging hex. Without a second thought, he returned a stunning curse without even looking at the person, his mind reeling with the newfound revelation.

This was a decoy.

The real battle was somewhere else altogether, and he had no doubt that the rest of the Order was making their way through Malfoy Manor at this very moment.

All he had to do was to wait for someone to alert the Dark Lord about the invasion. Draco kept his mind alert as he assumed his position near the back of Gringotts. Instead of the killing curse, he used stunning hexes, strong ones that made his victims drop to the ground as though dead. It wasn't the wisest option, but Draco realised that if he was going to defect, he couldn't defect to an organisation where most of its members were dead.

It wasn't long before a bloodied

Rodolphus Lestrange apparated into Gringotts, pushing his way through to get to the Dark Lord. Moments later, the Dark Lord was calling his Death-Eaters to him, and Draco quickly apparated to the Dark Lord's side.

"The Malfoy Manor is under attack," the Dark Lord told him, before Draco could even murmur a pleasant greeting. "Take yourself and several others, see if you can capture any more of the Order."

"Yes, my lord," Draco said quickly, before pushing up the sleeve of his jacket. "Shall I summon the rest of the Death-Eaters here, my lord?"

"Summon them all, Draco," the Dark Lord returned evenly. "We'll destroy the Order tonight."

Draco allowed his lips to curl up in a fleeting smirk as he tapped his wand to his Dark Mark.

This was it.

Hermione had spent close to an hour sitting in the darkness. She couldn't go back to sleep, and she sat huddled up on the stairs, clasping her hands together as she waited silently for Draco to return. Or for something to happen.

And then, something did happen.

Draco's phial began to burn, and she studied the coordinates on it. Then she was distracted by the thudding of footsteps from the ceiling above. She

heard Pansy yelling for Blaise and Theo to get up. Mere moments later, Blaise hurried down the stairs and Hermione quickly got up, turning on the lights in the living room with her wand.

"Where's Draco?" Blaise asked, the second he saw Hermione.

She bit her lip. "You-know-who summoned him awhile ago. Draco said that you and Pansy have to go to the Malfoy Manor."

"But the phials - "

"That's for Theo. You and Pansy have to go to Malfoy Manor to free those captured Order members."

Blaise faltered, studying the serious expression on Hermione's face for a moment. Then he sighed and nodded.

"Alright," he sighed, stuffing the phials back under his shirt before glancing up the stairs. "Pansy, Theo! Hurry the hell up! And where's Luna?"

"Here," the blonde haired witch stepped out of the room adjacent to the kitchen, rubbing her eyes blearily. "Is it time?"

"Yes," Blaise spoke with an air of calm confidence, and Hermione quickly realised that in the absence of Draco, he was practically second-in-command. "Remember the plan, Luna, and stick to it. Save those you can, leave those you can't."

Luna nodded, hastily zipping up her jacket and running to the shelves to retrieve the port-keys. Pansy and Theo came rushing down the stairs a moment

later, Theo's eyes bright as the prospect of a midnight mission clearly excited him, while Pansy's face was more or less tight with anxiety.

"Please be careful," Hermione said softly, exchanging a quick hug with Pansy. After telling her not to worry, the three Slytherins apparated out of the house, leaving her alone with Luna, who was still preparing to go undercover.

Hermione knew exactly how the plan worked. Several days ago, Draco had run it through with them step by step, and it was all working like clockwork now. When the time came for the Order to attack, Blaise and Pansy were to go straight to the basement of the Malfoy Manor where the captured prisoners

were being held. They were to rescue as many as they could; until caught, deliberately, by the Order itself.

"You've always wanted to fucking defect," Draco had said to Blaise, "here's your perfect chance. You and Pansy can defect in the most obvious way possible, by helping the Order members escape from their prison cells. And while you're at it, you might as well take down as many Death-Eaters as you can, including Theo."

"Are you fucking serious?" Theo had yelled, staring at Draco in horror. "You're going to let him hex me?"

Blaise had grinned at that. "It would be my pleasure, Draco."

Luna, on the other hand, was to provide

backup using a Disillusionment charm. That was something Hermione had quickly realised about Draco's plans - he liked having backups, just in case things went awry. Luna's job was to rescue as many of the Order's prisoners as she could find, as well as portkey Blaise and Pansy the hell out of there before the Death-Eaters could kill them off.

Still, Hermione couldn't help but feel her gut twist in worry. She stepped towards Luna, tapping the girl on the shoulder. "Luna?"

"Oh, hi, Hermione," the girl still sounded tranquil as ever, despite the fact that she was due to enter the fray at any moment. "What's up?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Do you

think I could help?"

There were screams and shouts resonating from the basement of the Malfoy Manor. Pansy couldn't help but grip Blaise's hand tightly as they made their way down the stairs, where they found a chaotic confrontation in full swing. Three Death-Eaters were battling two Order members, while a third lay in a motionless heap on the floor. Their presence caught the attention of the five other people, and Pansy immediately stepped forward.

"Stay calm. We're on your side," she said, keeping a clamp on the wave of

nervousness rising up in her when she realised that she recognised none of the Order members. It was going to be so much more difficult to negotiate this way. "We've defected."

Her words made the room go silent, and she quickly took the opportunity to hurl a stunning curse at the nearest Death-Eater. He immediately dropped to the ground, and she smirked at the Order members.

"Does this prove my point?"

Blaise quickly took down the remaining two Death-Eaters with stunning curses, before turning to the Order members, who stared at them in disbelief. "Your friends are down that hallway," he said calmly. "You'd better hurry."

"How do we know we can trust you?"

One of them asked, still gazing at them suspiciously, keeping his wand poised to attack.

Pansy rolled her eyes and strode down the hallway towards the cells, tugging on Blaise so that he'd follow her. "The fact that you're still standing there alive and talking to us," she tossed nonchalantly over her shoulder, "that alone speaks volumes, doesn't it?"

"Do you know what else speaks volumes?"

Pansy froze as she heard another voice, whirling around immediately to face the person. She and Blaise stiffened as they saw Kingsley Shacklebolt descending the stairs, with a group of over thirty Order members behind him.

"Sir - " Blaise began, raising his hands as a form of surrender.

"Those Dark-Marks on your arms," Shacklebolt said, before one of the members sent a fiery spell hurtling their way, leaving the tips of Pansy's hair singed as Blaise quickly pushed her out of the way.

And it all went to hell from there.

Draco had pulled out all the stops this time. Upon the Dark Lord's request, he had selected eight other Death-Eaters to defend Malfoy Manor with him. He had Theo and Guthrie, whom he knew were trustworthy and could hold their own.

And he'd picked out the rest of the Dark Lord's top-notch fighters; Antonin Dolohov, the three Lestranges - Bellatrix, Rodolphus and Rabastan, along with two members of the Peverells - Walden MacNair and Yaxley.

It was going to be a cutthroat battle, but he hoped that the Order could at least take out some of them, or all of them. Only then would the Dark Lord's army be weakened tremendously. He was practically handing the victory over to the Order on a silver platter.

Ignoring Bellatrix's cackles of laughter as she walked beside him, he led the group down the stairs to the basement of the Malfoy Manor. And then he stopped short as he heard a familiar voice

speaking amidst the sizzle of curses and spells shooting in every different direction.

Blaise.

"You've got to hear us out, sir," Blaise was saying to Kingsley Shacklebolt, holding out his wand as he cast a protective shield in front of him and Pansy to protect themselves from the hexes that the Order was shooting their way. "We're on your side. We've defected, we've been waiting for the Order to attack the Manor for days now." Draco deliberately stepped forward as planned, holding out a hand to stop Bellatrix, whom he was certain was mere seconds away from shooting an Avada at Blaise for defecting.

"Zabini," Draco's voice was clipped, and everyone immediately turned to face him. He noticed several familiar faces in his peripheral vision, but kept his attention on Blaise and Pansy. "What the fuck is this?"

And, just as planned, Blaise smirked. "Sorry, mate," he drawled, and directed his wand in Theo's direction. "Stupefy." The curse came far too swift to catch, and Theo dropped to the ground immediately. Amidst the confused, horrified silence, Blaise turned to Shackbolt. "Now do you believe me? Pansy and I are defected Death-Eaters." Draco growled low in his throat and shot a Stupefy back at Blaise, who was promptly flung back and lay in a

motionless heap on the floor. Draco turned to the other Death-Eaters behind him, and hoped he looked equally as furious as they were about the defected Death-Eaters.

"Kill them all," he said simply, before turning around and stunning Pansy as well. And then the basement was filled with the wired crackles of lethal hexes, screams of fear and, louder than anything else, Bellatrix's maniacal laughter.

Things were falling apart.

Hermione knew it from the moment she portkeyed into the basement with Luna. The two were hiding under

Disillusionment charms, although Hermione had the added protection of the Cloak of Invisibility.

Luna immediately cast a stunning spell at the final Death-Eater who was standing in their way, before grabbing Hermione's hand and pulling her towards the prison cells. The place was dark, and Hermione draped the Cloak over herself and Luna before holding out her wand.

"Lumos."

A narrow beam of light lit her wand, and she held it out patiently as Luna set about freeing the captured Order members with the Unlocking charm. When all the cells were unlocked, Luna removed her own Disillusionment charm. Hermione stood silently in the corner, hidden by

the Cloak as Luna was reunited with her friends from the Order.

She was thankful that Luna didn't say a word to alert anyone of her presence, because Hermione didn't think she could handle meeting anyone from her past at the moment. She did recognise several familiar faces, however, like Seamus Finnegan and Cho Chang. They didn't look too well, but she was just glad that they were safe.

Suddenly, voices echoed down the hallway and Hermione stiffened when she overheard a familiar one. Blaise. And then there were more distorted voices as more people entered the hallway. Luna had heard it too, and she quickly handed out portkeys to her

friends before casting a Disillusionment charm on herself once more.

A moment later, Hermione felt Luna sidle up to her underneath the Cloak. "Come on," Luna whispered, "we have to stick together."

The two shuffled forward, and Hermione felt her heart thud painfully against her chest as she heard spells being shot across the hallway. They rounded the corner, hiding safely behind a pillar, and she could've sworn her heart stopped beating momentarily as she saw the scene before her. She'd spent so long in captivity that she couldn't even remember how a battle looked like.

And this was bloody and terrifying in every way.

The first person she spotted was Draco, who was standing in the middle of the room, a deathly calm look on his face as he duelled against three Order members. She thought that there was a certain grace to him in the middle of an ugly battle. Duelling almost seemed too easy for him.

"Where's Blaise?" Luna's faintly disturbed voice drew Hermione back to the matter at hand. "I can't find Blaise."

Nor could she. Her eyes landed on another familiar figure sprawled in a corner, lying beneath a pile of rubble. She nudged Luna. "Pansy's over there."

"Alright," Luna breathed. "You've got a portkey with you, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Be careful, Hermione."

Hermione felt Luna leave her to get to the girl. She couldn't see Luna, but she imagined that the blonde witch was ducking under spells and crawling across the floor to get to Pansy. Pansy vanished mere seconds later, and when Hermione didn't feel Luna return, she realised that the girl had portkeyed the unconscious Pansy out of the Malfoy Manor.

She was on her own now.

Gripping her wand tightly, Hermione scanned the surroundings for Blaise, shying further behind the pillar when a Death-Eater was blasted into the wall next to her.

After squinting into the distance, she

finally saw him. He lay in a collapsed heap near one of the pillars opposite and she felt a sudden surge of determination to get to him. Remembering that the Cloak was resistant to hexes and spells, Hermione gripped the cloth tightly around her and slowly made her way towards Blaise, making sure to keep close to the ground.

On the way over, she felt someone's foot bump into her and she flinched, gritted her teeth and kept crawling, taking refuge behind a Death-Eater who was caught in a fierce duel. She was mere feet away from Blaise when something in her peripheral vision caught her eye. A blue light came shooting straight towards the Death-Eater, but he ducked

at the last minute, and the spell caught the wall behind him.

Hermione felt it before she saw it - a fiery burn on the entire length of her leg as the wall came crumbling down on her. Unable to help herself, she let out a sharp cry and twisted backwards, gasping at the searing pain in her leg.

Merlin, it hurt, but she felt the pain momentarily cease when the Death-Eater whirled around, a look of suspicion on his face as he eyed the rubble. She could've sworn he could see right through the Cloak.

Then he was pointing his wand at her. "Homenum Revelio," he said, and within the next second, his face had contorted with recognition, and he reached down

to grab her by the leg. "You! You're that mudblood!"

Hermione cried again as she kicked at the Death-Eater and this time, she saw Draco a far distance away, his head whipped round and turned in her direction, as though he had heard her.

She was certain the horror that registered on his face mirrored hers exactly.

But she was quickly distracted by the excruciating pain that threatened to engulf her. When the Death-Eater reached for her again, the spell that spilled past her lips was almost instinctive and second-nature to her.

"Flipendo!"

It wasn't a particularly strong one, but

sufficient to knock him back several feet. Seizing the opportunity, Hermione whipped out her portkey and grabbed Blaise's hand. Keeping a tight grip on the Cloak and her wand, she yanked on the portkey and vanished with Blaise.

Draco could've sworn that he was imagining things the first time he heard Hermione's voice.

It had thrown him off at first, and he'd simply cast a fleeting glance in the general direction he thought he'd heard it from. But it was ridiculous - Hermione wasn't even part of this plan. She was supposed to be waiting back at Godric's

Hollow with phials ready to ease whatever injury that Pansy, Blaise and Luna came back with.

So he'd dismissed it as merely a figment of his imagination and continued duelling the three other Order members whose names escaped him at the moment. He didn't even have a problem deflecting their hexes, and he was growing tired of their incompetency.

They were supposed to capture him, for Merlin's sake. How difficult could that be?

For a moment, he thought of just surrendering and letting them incarcerate him. But, logically, it wasn't the best move. Bellatrix and Rodolphus were nearby, and he didn't want anyone to

know that he was defecting. No one could know that. The Dark Lord could afford to have two Death-Eaters defect, or lose several others like Theo or Guthrie, who were by now incapacitated by the Order.

But Draco knew that he'd be at the top of the Dark Lord's hit list if he himself were to be seen defecting. And he couldn't afford to take that risk. At least, not when Hermione still needed him.

He was still deep in thought, absentmindedly deflecting curses when that familiar voice resonated from the other end of the hallway again. His head automatically swivelled to the right.

And then he saw her.

It felt like a brutal kick to his gut, and he

felt all the oxygen leave his lungs at that instant. She looked terrified, and he felt his heart sink when he saw a Death-Eater reach out for her. Their gazes locked for a brief second.

But before he could do anything, he felt a strong hex hit him from the back, too forceful to even resist. It sent him spiralling to the ground. He tasted blood as his cheek collided heavily against the floor, and for a moment, he saw his vision blur with black spots.

"Fuck," he breathed, blinking rapidly and trying to turn so that he could see Hermione. Save Hermione. It seemed almost instinctive with him. But then his vision collided with a familiar figure descending the steps, along with an army

of Death-Eaters trailing behind.

Still in a haze, he heard Kingsley Shacklebolt yell for a retreat, and a pair of hands reached for him, dragging him roughly across the floor. The last thing he registered was the Dark Lord's eyes narrowing into deadly, serpentine slits, looking more furious than Draco had ever seen him before.

Then Draco felt a sharp, stinging blow to the back of his neck, and his vision went black.

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Binds target.

Hermione woke up the next morning when the light from the sun's rays streamed in through the window. The light hit her in disjointed, fragmented hues, and she squinted for a moment before lifting her head from the pillow. The first thing she noticed was that Draco was not next to her. And the second glaring detail - this wasn't her room.

Bits and pieces of the previous night came to mind. She remembered sneaking into Malfoy Manor to help, and using a portkey to bring herself and Blaise back to the safehouse in Godric's Hollow. But the landing had been a rough one, and she remembered collapsing in the living room, with Pansy and Luna's frantic voices ringing in her head as she blacked out.

But she hadn't a clue what happened next, and she had no idea where she was now.

Feeling a surge of panic, she scrambled up, glancing around for her wand. To her immense relief, she found it on the bedside drawer and quickly snatched it up, holding it tightly between her fingers.

She climbed out of bed, feeling a slight, dull ache in her leg. It had to be the injury she'd sustained from the fight the day before. Limping slightly, she made her way out of the room and down the stairs. Then she paused abruptly, her eyes widening when she saw a familiar yet simultaneously unfamiliar person in the kitchen.

The woman turned, her lips widening in a warm, welcoming smile as she took a step forward, wiping her hands hurriedly on her apron as she did so. "Hello, Hermione," she greeted, and Hermione instantly recognised her voice. It was the voice she'd heard over the telephone, the one person she'd spent so many afternoons talking to.

She exhaled, staring up at the woman in disbelief. "Andromeda?"

Andromeda Tonks smiled brightly, closing the distance to wrap her arms around Hermione. "I'm so glad you're here," she whispered, and Hermione noticed how she smelled of flowers and cinnamon. It was a comforting smell that immediately made her feel more at ease. She pulled back, studying Hermione closely. "How's your leg, dear?"

"Better," Hermione settled down on the chair, suddenly realising that there was another person at the table. A toddler of about three years old was seated in a high chair and Hermione felt her breath quicken as she reached out, clasping her fingers briefly around the boy's chubby

ones. "Is this - is this Teddy?"

"My grandson, yes," Andromeda nodded, stepping around the dining table to arrange the plates, setting aside a set for Hermione.

"You've told me about him on the phone, 'Dromeda, I just never - " and Hermione felt tears sting the back of her eyelids briefly as she recalled how Andromeda had told her that both of Teddy's parents were now dead. "Hello, Teddy," Hermione said softly to the boy, who looked up at her with a transfixed gaze. "I'm Hermione."

Andromeda smiled as she watched the two of them. "Say hello to Hermione, Teddy. Her-My-Nee."

"'Mione," Teddy mumbled, after a few

tries, and Hermione laughed. She thought he was incredibly precious, and realised that she felt utterly at ease with Andromeda and Teddy. More so than she had felt around anyone else, apart from Draco, of course.

So when Teddy stretched out his hands to her, she quickly pulled him out of his chair, settling him down comfortably on her lap. She laced her arms loosely around him and turned to Andromeda. "How did you find us, 'Dromeda? All I remember was returning back to Godric's Hollow."

Andromeda sat down on the chair opposite, sliding a plate of pancakes over to Hermione. "Draco told me to check up on the lot of you. He contacted

me several days ago and told me about the plan - Merlin, that boy's risky as anything and I was worried sick. He said that once he and Theo got themselves captured by the Order, the four of you wouldn't be safe in Godric's Hollow anymore."

Hermione felt her insides twist painfully. "So - Draco and Theo are prisoners now?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Luna's been out since six this morning to check, and she's due back anytime soon. After the Protean charms on the phials lit last night, I knew that Draco and the others had officially defected. So I left Teddy with my house-elf and came over to the safehouse, but the lot of you had disappeared by then."

"Protean charms?" Hermione frowned, before recognition swiftly dawned on her. "You mean - "

"Yes," Andromeda drew out a thin black cord that hung loosely around her neck. On the bottom of the cord sat a familiar looking phial. "The incantation that Draco created for me is different, so it doesn't always light, unless in the most crucial of situations. It was lit last night, and I waited around for the four of you to return."

Hermione briefly recalled how Draco had once told her that the incantation he gave to her was a potent one. Help will come, he'd said, and he was right. The phials didn't just connect her to the other Slytherins; it connected her to

Andromeda as well.

"Anyway, Pansy and Luna were the first to return," Andromeda continued, as she reached across the table to hand Teddy a biscuit. "Then you and Blaise came back. After we fixed your wounds, we packed everything up and left Godric's Hollow. Blaise and Pansy just went to bed two hours ago. It's safe here, Hermione," Andromeda added, when she saw the worried look on the brunette's face. "The Order's headquarters is nearby, and this house has enough protection spells to ward off any and every attack."

Hermione was about to question further when the back door opened and Luna entered in a flurry. The blonde witch

looked exhausted, dark circles lined her eyes but she smiled brightly at them. "Hello, Hermione, how're you feeling? How's your leg?"

"Better, thank you. Have you any news about Draco?" Hermione couldn't help but ask. She could've sworn she saw a knowing smile play on Andromeda's lips and she hastily extended her concern. "Or Theo?"

"Yes," Luna returned, shrugging out of her coat and reaching over to pat Teddy lightly on the head. "Draco, Theo and two other Death-Eaters have been transferred over to the headquarters. I hear that the Order only managed to capture four - the rest of the Death-Eaters escaped when the Dark Lord

arrived with reinforcements."

"What about our side?" Andromeda asked in concern, and Hermione bit her lip. She'd never really picked a side, but it was apparent that she was clearly on the Order's side now. It now felt like a proper war. Hermione didn't know whether to feel happy or worried about that.

The light seemed to go out of Luna's eyes. "Not too good. Apparently, we lost a lot of the new recruits at Gringotts. And some of our best fighters have been captured by You-Know-Who. I hear that Ginny, Dean and the Patil twins are missing."

"Ginny?" Hermione felt a jolt of surprise, and her arms automatically

tightened around Teddy. "Ginny Weasley?"

Luna nodded sombrely. "I haven't talked to any of the D.A. - "

"D.A.?"

"Dumbledore's Army," Luna explained, and Hermione was glad that her friend wasn't treading on eggshells around her. Hermione had forgotten a lot, and she was still struggling at times, but it was nice to know that there were people eager to help her regain her memory, but not impatient enough to rush her about it. "You, Harry and Ron were the ones who started it during our fifth-year at Hogwarts. Anyway, I haven't talked to any of the D.A. because most of them are either missing or incapacitated. Neville

and Ron are searching for You-Know-Who's base."

"Naturally," Andromeda hummed in agreement. "I imagine Ronald Weasley would be very upset about his sister being missing."

"Not as upset as Harry. Harry's already a shell of himself ever since he lost to You-Know-Who, but now he's just completely given up."

A disappointed silence settled between them. Even the ever-optimistic Luna seemed at a complete loss. But Hermione had participated in her fair share of defeats for the past three years to know that there was still hope at a time like this. At times, it wasn't so much a war against You-Know-Who than it

was a war against oneself. She wondered if Harry Potter had his own monsters to face just as she had hers.

She picked up Teddy and placed him back in his chair, kissing him gently on the forehead when he murmured her name again. Then she turned to Luna. "We'll figure out a way. We just have to get Draco and Theo out of their cells, and the six of us can think of something - I'm sure of that."

"I don't think it's that easy," Luna said, matter-of-factly, "Draco's one of the Death-Eaters that the Order's been tracking down for a long time now. I don't think the Order will release him."

Hermione's eyes widened in alarm. She felt a lump lodge itself in her throat as

she thought about Draco being imprisoned for days on end. "But we need them! Both of them!"

Andromeda patted her on the hand sympathetically. "I'll see what I can do. I'll talk to the Order after breakfast. I promised Draco that I'd get him and Theo out, even if it may take a little time."

Hermione sighed. A little time? How long was that going to take - hours, days or weeks? Her mind was reeling as she thought about the situation. Once Pansy and Blaise got up, perhaps she could convince them to go on a little rescuing mission with her.

After a moment of silence, Luna climbed to her feet with a tranquil smile on her

face. "Well, I'm going back to the Order," she said breezily, before turning to Hermione. "Do you want to come along? You can join in the next mission, I'm sure Neville would love to have you on the team."

Now panic really seized her, and Hermione took three steady breaths to calm herself. "No, but thank you, Luna," she hastily said, gripping the edge of the table tightly. "I'd like to be here with Pansy and Blaise."

"Oh, alright," Luna looked faintly disappointed, but there was a glimmer of understanding in her eyes. She took her coat, along with an English muffin from the plate and headed towards the back door. "Bye, Hermione. Bye,

Andromeda."

The door swung shut behind Luna, and Andromeda turned to Hermione. "Listen," the older witch said, her voice lowered in an almost conspiratorial whisper, "I don't know how quickly I'll be able to convince the Order to let Draco and Theo go. But they're probably being held in the east wing of the headquarters, somewhere on the second floor. Take Pansy and Blaise with you, and get them out if you can. We'll hide them here."

A smile flitted across Hermione's face and she breathed in relief, gladdened to have someone else on her side. "Really?"

"Yes, really. I can't bear seeing my

nephew and his friend locked up like that." Andromeda shook her head, before reaching for a familiar piece of fabric draped over a chair and handing it over to Hermione. "Here's your Cloak. Good luck, Hermione."

Draco had woken up to the sound of a familiar voice swearing nineteen to the dozen. Theo. There were two other people yelling across the room. One was Guthrie Rhodes, which wasn't a surprise because he'd been quickly captured the night before. The other was Rodolphus Lestrage, Bellatrix's husband and, by extension, his uncle.

Draco felt his heart beat in trepidation. Rodolphus was a Death-Eater almost as sly and cunning as Bellatrix. Capturing Rodolphus wasn't a good move on the Order's part; the Dark Lord would now be searching for two of his top Death-Eaters - Draco and Rodolphus. The stakes were so much higher now.

Draco frowned and pushed himself into a sitting position. The cell was small, almost claustrophobic, without any ventilation except for a small door that barely came up to his knees, sealed with hardy metal bars.

"I'm not going to fucking pee in this shite-hole," Theo's voice was loud and echoed through the entire place. Draco would've laughed in any other situation,

but right now, Theo was just giving him a bloody headache. "It's too unsanitary."

"Then hold it in!" Came a gruff reply from one of the guards outside. Draco thought the voice sounded somewhat familiar, but he couldn't place a finger on it. "You're a prisoner now, so keep your mouth shut."

"I'll kill you!" Rodolphus roared back, from his own cell. Draco winced as the sheer decibel half-deafened him. "The Dark Lord will return for us, and I'll kill you with my bare hands. Do you hear me?"

Merlin, his uncle was just as insane as his aunt was. Draco rolled his eyes and lay back down on the bench. "Uncle, dearest," he drawled loudly, knowing

that everyone in the other prison cells could hear him. "Do shut up now. There wouldn't be an element of surprise if you tell the bloody Order about our revenge plans."

There was a beat of silence.

And then Rodolphus's voice broke the momentary calm. "Draco? Is that you?"

"Last time I checked."

"What the hell is going on, Draco?"

"Yeah," this was Guthrie's voice now, "did Zabini really defect?"

"Apparently so," Draco replied calmly, sticking to the same ignorance he'd assumed the day before and hoping that Theo would keep his mouth shut and do the same. "Zabini and Parkinson sold us out to the Order. We should've known

that the attack on Gringotts was just a decoy."

"Bloody Goyle," Rodolphus growled angrily. "If he hadn't summoned us to Gringotts, we wouldn't have left the Manor unguarded."

Draco almost heaved a sigh of relief at that. Thank Merlin his uncle had bought the story, and blamed Goyle Senior for the failed mission instead of him.

"Blame your own incompetency," the guard outside retorted sharply, clearly having eavesdropped on their conversation and unable to stop himself from offering his own opinions. "The Order's far stronger than you give it credit for. And when You-Know-Who returns, we'll be more than ready to

defeat him and the rest of his equally inept army."

"The Dark Lord will destroy you and the rest of the Order - "

And as Rodolphus continued to yell at the guards, Draco lifted a hand and cast a wordless Muffliato on his ears. He leaned his head back down on the bench and shut his eyes, hoping against hope that Hermione was alright and safe. Merlin, it had been less than twelve hours and her absence already left an empty, gaping hole in his gut.

But there was nothing he could do, short of getting himself and Theo out of here. He could, he knew he could, even while wandless. But it would just provoke the Order, and Andromeda had promised

she'd get him out herself.

It was just a waiting game from here on out.

Hermione spent the rest of the morning with Teddy as she waited for Pansy and Blaise to get up. Teddy was a cheerful, happy child, and she felt a certain wistfulness tug at her when she was with him. Once upon a time, she was just as sheltered as he was - content to live in a small apartment, surrounded by the people she loved, safe with Draco.

But now that 17-65 had defected, Hermione found herself in a constant state of worry. Was it always going to be

like this? Always the pressure of having to make the best in a war, having to fight, having to survive?

Hermione pushed those thoughts aside momentarily and focused on making Teddy laugh. Draco had told her some time ago that Teddy was a Metamorphmagi just like his mother, Nymphadora. Hermione was thrilled to learn that when Teddy laughed, some parts of his hair streaked pink before fading back to its original colour when he stopped.

Sometime later, Blaise awoke and entered the kitchen sleepily. After thanking Hermione profusely for getting him to safety the previous night, he headed into the kitchen to make lunch,

just in time as Pansy came stumbling down the stairs, her black hair in completely disarray.

"I was just talking to Hermione about going to rescue Draco and Theo," Blaise said to Pansy, when she settled down at the table.

Pansy nodded, using her wand to conjure a blue butterfly for Teddy, who laughed happily and watched in fascination. "I'm with you on that," she said, nodding at both Hermione and Blaise. "The five of us have to stick together. It seems so strange without the other two."

"Andromeda's trying to get them out," Hermione said, before relaying the information that Andromeda had given her, along with a piece of paper that had

a hurried incantation scribbled on it.

The three made plans over lunch and before they left, Hermione left Teddy with the house-elf, Grus, just like Andromeda had told her to. Then they made their way out of the house and began a slow trek towards the headquarters after Blaise had placed a Disillusionment charm on himself and Pansy.

Hermione had her Cloak wrapped around her, along with a small satchel with an Extension Charm that contained healing potions, just in case. The journey was filled with a tense silence, and Hermione soon realised that Pansy and Blaise were dead set on reuniting with Draco and Theo, even at the expense of

putting their lives in danger.

"The sky's getting dark," Pansy said after awhile. "Blaise, do you think we're getting close? We've just past the seventh willow tree like Andromeda told us to."

"Hold on." Hermione felt Blaise brush past her. He muttered the incantation that Andromeda had given them. Immediately, the air in front of them seemed to shift. Hermione detected a soft shimmer of magic as an invisible shield slowly parted in front of them, revealing an old, stately building behind. "Merlin," Pansy breathed, sounding utterly awed. "How did they come up with this?"

Blaise let out a chuckle of disbelief. "I have no idea. McGonagall's work,

probably?"

"Hold on, let me get something straight. This place is invisible with the shield. But is it also intangible? Like, if we were Muggles, could we walk right through it?"

"Beats me."

Hermione laughed softly, but she understood Pansy's fascination. It was probably the most complex spell she'd ever seen, and she was very much impressed. Obviously, the Order wasn't taking any chances now that they had lost so many people.

She felt Pansy grip her arm as they quietly made their way towards the building. "Okay," Blaise said, his voice low and almost inaudible as they neared

the side door. "Follow the plan. Pansy, you'll search for Draco and Theo's wands - Andromeda said that the confiscated wands are somewhere in the basement. I'll find Draco and Theo, and Hermione, you'll watch my back, alright?"

"Got it," Hermione said, and held her breath as Blaise whispered another incantation to unlock the door. Once inside, Hermione felt her nerves tingle with anxiety. The main hall was empty, but there were distant sounds of chatter in a room someway off, and the constant patter of feet as people traipsed through the hallway and down the many corridors.

Pansy immediately disappeared off to

the basement, and then it was just she and Blaise. She kept close to him as they made their way up the stairs, scarcely avoiding several people along the way. It didn't take long before they found themselves standing in front of a narrow corridor with two Order members guarding the door at the end.

"Wait right here," Blaise told Hermione, and she felt him step away from her.

A moment later, she saw red lights shoot towards the guards. They collapsed in an almost graceful manner that couldn't have been possible without the use of another spell. Then she felt Blaise grip her arm and the pressed forward. He murmured another incantation under his breath that swiftly unlocked the door.

The room was dimmed, lined with a row of cells and people standing guard in front of each cell. But Hermione's lips tugged up in relief when she heard a familiar voice grumbling in the background.

Theo.

But her joy was short-lived, because the moment the two of them stepped in, a high-pitched siren reverberated throughout the entire building. The guards immediately sprang into action, pointing their wands in the direction of the door.

"Who's there?" One of the guards said, waving his wand so that the alarm stopped abruptly. Hermione vaguely recognised him as Oliver Wood, from

one of the Hogwarts yearbooks she'd read back at the apartment. "Show yourself, or we won't hesitate to hex you."

Blaise swore under his breath, hastily pushing Hermione behind him as he removed his own Disillusionment charm. Immediately, the tension heightened and Hermione felt her breath catch as she took in the volatile situation. Even though she was shielded by the Cloak, she worried for Blaise, who could easily trigger off a bombardment of hexes if he wasn't careful.

"Okay," Blaise began, "listen - you guys know me, right? Blaise Zabini? Fellow Hogwarts schoolmate? Come on - Justin,

Katie, Michael - come on, you remember me, don't you?"

"You received the Dark Mark," Michael shook his head, "doesn't matter if we remember you, Zabini. We can't trust you."

"But I defected," Blaise returned in faint amusement, and Hermione marvelled at how calm he could sound in such a situation. "I did make myself explicitly clear last night at the Manor, didn't I?"

"Even then," one of the other guards directed his wand at Blaise. "Stupefy!" Blaise didn't even flinch. He had held up his wand in a flash to deflect the spell with a stronger one that sent the guard flying back. But it wasn't the wisest move. Immediately, a barrage of spells

flew at Blaise, and he reached out a hand to push Hermione into the corner, holding up a protective shield in front of him.

Hermione was just contemplating on revealing herself to stop the chaos, but something caught her eye in her peripheral vision. Someone, from inside one of the cells, had summoned the wand from the guard whom Blaise had hexed unconscious earlier. And a split second later, the walls of the cell was blasted open.

Rodolphus Lestrangle stepped out, a borrowed wand in hand. Hermione remembered him so vividly because he'd stood by laughing when Bellatrix had tortured her in the Malfoy Manor years

ago. The tension skyrocketed as Rodolphus joined in the fight, and everything after that happened far too quickly for Hermione to register. Spells flew across the room in every different direction as Rodolphus single-handedly battled the six other guards in the room. A particularly fiery spell from Oliver was easily evaded, but it exploded into the cells behind Rodolphus.

And then Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she saw Draco, Theo and another Death-Eater step out from their cells, matching looks of wariness on their faces. The three Death-Eaters were immediately made new targets, but Draco and Theo easily avoided them. The last one, on the other hand, wasn't as

lucky, and Hermione gasped when she saw him crushed under a powerful Reducto that Katie Bell shot at him.

"Stay here, Hermione. I have to help them," Blaise hissed quickly at her over his shoulder, before rushing through the crowd towards Draco and Theo, deflecting any curse that the guards shot their way.

There was nothing Hermione could do except to stay in her corner, but when she saw Katie flung back by a powerful curse, she quickly rushed over to the girl, pouring a small portion of healing potion into Katie's mouth.

She kept an eye on Draco from her corner of the room, noticing how he swiftly exchanged words with Theo and

Blaise. She saw Blaise handing his wand over to Draco, before rushing towards Rodolphus and physically taking him down, kneeling roughly on Rodolphus's arm so that the man couldn't cast another spell.

"Zabini, what the hell are you doing?" Rodolphus's face was red and he was half choking with furious rage. Hermione quickly took the opportunity to hurry across the room, checking up on Justin Finch-Fletchley, who had taken a particularly nasty stinging hex to his abdomen and now lay unconscious.

The room was now seized with a surprised silence, and Blaise lifted his head to look at the other Order members. "Now do you believe me? I'm on your

side."

Oliver and Michael seemed to falter, but one of the other guards glared at Draco and Theo. "They're Death-Eaters! He's You-Know-Who's right-hand man! Why the hell are we still hesitating?" He yelled, drawing back his wand to cast another spell at Draco.

A sudden wave of protectiveness surged through Hermione and she quickly discarded the Cloak, rushing over to place herself between the guard's path and Draco. She could physically feel their shock, hear the echoes of gasps in the room. Everyone stared at her with open-mouthed amazement, but she fought the claustrophobia and panic in her chest and took a deep breath.

"Please don't," she said quietly. She supposed they all knew her - but it felt like she was staring back at a bunch of strangers. Nevertheless, she lifted her lips in a tiny smile and nodded at them. "They're good people, I promise. They've kept me safe all this while."

"Shit," Michael breathed, staring at Hermione in disbelief. "Hermione?"

"What are you doing here?" One of the others said, "we thought you - "

But the rest of the sentence was left hanging as Rodolphus suddenly struggled and pushed Blaise aside with a surprising amount of strength, pushing his way past the guards to get to Hermione. It happened so quickly that no one could react in time, and Hermione

found her throat clog and oxygen leave her lungs as the tip of his wand was suddenly brought to her neck.

He was going to kill her.

"You filthy mudblood," he spat, eyes narrowing as he pressed the wand tighter against her throat, her hands futilely coming up to push him, anything, to get him away from her. "Avad - "

But the words never left his lips, and Hermione suddenly felt herself wrenched out of the way. Then Draco was face to face with Rodolphus, his silver eyes glinting with barely-restrained fury as he wrenched the wand from his uncle's grasp.

Rodolphus's eyes widened with horror. "Draco, what are you - "

Hermione knew that Draco had killed before. But she'd never actually seen it in action, seen the way his eyes glossed over with something like emotionless monotony and hard, excruciating self-loathing, the way his fingers always tightened on the wand with deadly purpose.

He spoke with such calmness that it almost seemed like he was speaking normally, and not uttering the most deadly of all spells.

"Avada Kedavra."

Rodolphus's eyes glazed over at the next instant and his lifeless body collapsed at Draco's feet. Draco took a step back, and turned to Hermione, his eyes flickering with sheer relief. "Are you

alright?"

Disregarding their audience completely, Hermione let out a choked sob and launched herself into Draco's arms. Her eyes were dry and she was still reeling from the shock of being so close to death, but more than anything, she was just glad that Draco was there.

"Thank you," she whispered to him, and felt his arms encircle her quickly, his lips glossing her forehead with a tenderness that made her ache.

"Told you I'd keep you safe, Granger."

A gasp of disbelief from one of the guards pulled Hermione back to the matter at hand. She reluctantly pulled back, a protective expression on her face as she stared down at the Order

members. "Draco, Blaise, Theo and Pansy are all good," she repeated firmly, "I've been living with them for the past few months. They've been helping to keep You-Know-Who off the Order's scent for three years. They're not going to betray you, you have my word."

"Shit," one of them said, and Hermione belatedly recognised him as Anthony Goldstein, one of her fellow schoolmates from Hogwarts. "Did they use the Imperius curse on you?"

She blinked. "What?"

"It's got to be that," Anthony said to the others, disregarding the angry growl that escaped Draco's throat. "Either that or Amortentia."

"I'm not - "

But before she could finish, Anthony had flung a stinging hex at Draco, who barely deflected it with his hand. And then the fight ensued, with Draco using Blaise's wand to deflect the hexes. Hermione quickly tossed hers to Theo, who eagerly joined in, while she protected herself and Blaise with the Cloak.

"This is getting out of hand!" Blaise yelled at her, amidst the commotion. He had retrieved a stray wand from Katie's incapacitated form and was now deflecting hexes with powerful shields. Hermione wholeheartedly agreed with his words, and was just about to open her mouth to reply when a formidable presence stepped into the room. She vaguely recognised him as Kingsley

Shacklebolt, and a group of Order members followed him behind, dragging a screaming, shrieking Pansy across the floor, tied up tightly in shiny black ropes.

At the sound of Pansy's screams, the fighting abruptly ceased. Hermione felt her heart sink as she saw Shacklebolt slam the door shut, preventing anyone from escaping. Andromeda had warned that there were anti-apparition wards in the east wing to prevent any prisoner from leaving. And now it was too late to run.

"What the hell is going on?" Shacklebolt thundered, glaring down at the group. Hermione instinctively found herself sidling closer to Draco, slipping her

fingers through his. She was glad when he held her tightly, shifting so that he was standing slightly in front of her.

"These Death-Eaters say that they've defected, sir," Oliver Wood was the first to break the silence. "And apparently, they've been housing Hermione Granger for the past few months."

"Hermione Granger?"

Shacklebolt turned to Hermione, who suddenly felt about two feet tall as she stared up at the man, as well as the crowd of Order members standing behind him. Some of them seemed astonished to see her, others doubtful.

The most doubtful one of all was Shacklebolt, who stared at Hermione as though he couldn't believe his eyes. Then

his eyes narrowed and she was certain that the situation had once again turned against them when Luna came bursting into the room, flinging the door open behind her. She looked rather out of breath, but her face was drawn tight with worry.

"Sir," she hastily said, stepping towards Hermione and raising her arms, as though to defend the group against the Order. "They're telling the truth. I've been living with Draco and the others for several weeks now, and Hermione has been living with them."

"Step aside, Luna," Shacklebolt returned calmly. "I will not allow Death-Eaters to roam about in the Order's headquarters. It's too risky. We even found this one

trying to break into our vault of wands to steal them," he looked down at Pansy, who glared back at him angrily. Turning to the group behind him, Shackbolt gave a short nod. "Put them into the cells. All of them."

"What?" Theo yelped, struggling as one of the Order members shot an Incarcerous at him. "But we've defected! We're fucking good now!"

Hermione tried to grab Theo before he could be taken away, but she was quickly restrained by Oliver. And then she let out a cry when she found herself pulled away from Draco, who seemed utterly furious by the turn of events. But, for some reason, he seemed reluctant to use any magic to retaliate and she

couldn't help but wonder why he was giving up without a fight.

It wasn't until Anthony Goldstein latched his fingers around Hermione to drag her into her individual cell when Draco lost his cool. "Don't fucking touch her!" He warned, his voice deadly as he lunged back at the wizard. "Goldstein, I fucking swear, if you put her into a cell, I will -"

But he was quickly hit by a Silencing charm and dragged off into the nearest cell. Shacklebolt reached for Hermione, but Luna now stepped up, holding out her wand protectively in front of herself and Hermione. "Sir, if Harry Potter finds out that you've forced his best friend to go through rounds of testing for spells

and curses, he's not going to be happy. Neither will Neville or Ronald, if they were to hear about this."

"Harry Potter is no longer a means to win the battle and you know that, Ms Lovegood. Now step aside, or I will forcibly remove you."

"Then at least give her one night. Hermione's tired and she needs to rest. You can test her in the morning."

Shacklebolt took a step closer to Luna, who held her ground. Finally, after what seemed like forever, he gave a sharp nod and turned to leave. "One night," he acceded, waving the other Order members after him. "Clear out the rubble, dispose of the bodies. I want this place guarded from the outside. I want

the doors charmed and locked down tight. Keep the four in their cells at all times. Lovegood, take Ms Granger's things and come with me."

The rest of the Order left, with some of them standing guard outside the room. Hermione suddenly found herself wandless, cloakless, and left alone in the room. Not entirely alone, of course, because the four Slytherins were still locked up. She quickly found Draco's cell and settled down on the gravelly floor, slipping her fingers through the gaps between the metal bars. A moment later, she felt his fingers slide across to meet hers, and she smiled.

He was here and that was enough.

After awhile, Theo let out a hollow

chuckle that broke the silence. "That went well," he sounded both tired and amused. "And you thought defecting would be a fucking piece of cake, Blaise."

Blaise sighed loudly from his cell. "Yeah, okay, that one's on me."

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29

s e r p e n s o r t i a

Conjures a snake.

Hermione remained by Draco's cell for the rest of the night. She listened to Theo's grumblings and Blaise's words of comfort to Pansy, who had screamed herself hoarse earlier in a futile attempt to keep from anyone finding out about the rescue mission.

Draco, on the other hand, was surprisingly silent throughout and Hermione gripped his fingers tight

between the metal bars. She wondered if his silence had something to do with him killing his uncle right in front of her. It was probably that.

Sometime later, the door creaked open and Luna entered, along with two guards trailing behind her. She carried several trays of food, and slipped each through the four separate cell doors. Then she set the last one in front of Hermione.

"Shacklebolt wants to know if you'd like a room to stay for the night," Luna said softly to Hermione. She looked rather frazzled; as though she'd spent hours running around putting out fires everywhere. "He's not very happy that you're here with them but he still welcomes you all the same."

"Well, I'm not leaving," Hermione said adamantly. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay," Luna nodded understandingly and climbed to her feet. "I'll see you in the morning, Hermione."

She threw another fleeting glance at the four cells, but after a moment's hesitation, she left with the guards. The door shut with a click and silence descended upon the room once again. Hermione picked listlessly at the food on her tray, but she couldn't summon an appetite.

"I miss being a Death-Eater," Theo's chirpy voice broke the silence at last. He sounded so cheerful that she couldn't help but quirk her lips into a brief smile. "What the hell, Theo," Blaise fired back.

Hermione could almost imagine him rolling his eyes. "If anyone outside hears that we're going to be in trouble - "

"But it's true. At least the food didn't taste so fucking shite when we were Death-Eaters."

"In other words," Pansy drawled, slyly, her voice still sounding rather hoarse. "You're saying that you miss Blaise's cooking."

"Fuck, no - "

"Aw, Theo," Blaise said, with exaggerated affection. "That's really sweet."

"You know what I don't miss?"

"Your face?" This snub came from Draco, and Hermione couldn't stop the chuckle that slipped past her lips. She

felt Draco's fingers tighten on hers and she eased back against the wall of his cell, listening to the Slytherins bicker in their usual fashion.

And, for a moment, she forgot that they were locked up in the thick of war, with the Order turned against them. With them, everything seemed normal and safe.

But this was not to last. As soon as the sun's first rays streaked through the windows, the doors burst open and Kingsley Shacklebolt entered. Hermione instinctively drew away, her back pressed against the wall of Draco's cell.

Several other members of the Order followed him, and she didn't miss the way their eyes latched onto her with blatant curiosity.

"Ms Granger," Shacklebolt levelled her with an even gaze. "You need to come with us. We need to have you checked for any potions or curses."

Hermione felt Draco's grasp loosen from hers as he began to pull back, but she latched firmly onto him. "I will if you let my friends out of their cells," she said, with a steadiness she didn't realise she possessed, "otherwise I'm not going anywhere."

"Ms Granger - "

"No, I won't!" She insisted heatedly, feeling a wave of anger surge through

her. "They did nothing wrong! All they wanted to do was to help the Order, and if you'd just listen or give them a chance, you'll realise that they don't deserve to be locked up."

Shacklebolt simply turned to the guard standing next to him. "Take her away."

Hermione's eyes widened as Anthony Goldstein directed his wand at her. She twisted her body just as she heard a loud "Stupefy!". The spell zipped past, narrowly missing her by just an inch. She heard Draco swear from inside his cell and Pansy gasp.

"You don't fucking use magic against someone who doesn't have a wand!" Theo yelled, sounding absolutely livid. "You're all such assholes, and you call

yourselves the bloody Order?"

"Just test her in here," came Blaise's voice, calm and reasonable in an attempt to negotiate with Shacklebolt. "She doesn't want to leave Draco and you're all just making things worse."

But Blaise's words fell on deaf ears as two other guards shot stunning spells at Hermione. She ducked swiftly, her hands and knees bloody from scrapping it against the rough gravel each time she rolled out of the way.

Amidst the buzzing in her ears, she heard Draco swear one more time in the distance. "Fuck it," he muttered and then there was a clatter as he hurled something at the wall of his cell.

What happened next was something she

hadn't in a million years pre-empted. A black snake slithered out between the metal bars of Draco's cell, its movements far too swift to react to. She registered the sounds of horrified yells and screams in the background as the guards all retreated, but somewhere within her subconscious, she remembered learning that snakes reacted to movement and the wisest thing was to stay still.

For a moment, she felt fear grip her heart as she recalled how she'd seen Nagini just days ago. This snake looked nothing like Nagini, but it was a snake and it was lethal all the same. Just as she was about to start panicking, the snake swiftly transformed back into Draco, a

transformation was so quick and well-rehearsed that she almost thought she'd imagined the whole thing. But he was there, standing outside of his cell, his form tall and imposing as he stood in front of her almost defensively.

"For fuck's sake," Draco swore, and as much as Hermione was still reeling from leftover astonishment, she couldn't help but smile at his usual arrogant manner.

"We didn't defect to be placed into cells. Did you really think that we've been staying in these bloody cells because we couldn't get out? If you don't want us here, we'd be more than happy to leave."

"Oh, they are definitely leaving!" Came a familiar voice by the doorway.

Andromeda pushed her way through the

crowd in a flurry, an appalled look on her face, with Luna trailing behind her. Luna discreetly shot a smile at Hermione, and she breathed in relief. Thank Merlin for Luna, who had probably been running around the whole night trying to find a way to help them.

"Kingsley," Andromeda headed straight to Shacklebolt, determination clear in her features. "McGonagall promised me that my nephew and his friends were under interrogation, not incarceration. Does she have any idea how you run things around here? Because I daresay she will not be pleased!"

Shacklebolt narrowed his eyes at her. "Andromeda, they are Death-Eaters - "

"Defected Death-Eaters!" Andromeda

fired back evenly. "You're going to let them out and they'll be staying with me, since they're clearly not welcome anywhere else and - "

Hermione found herself tuning out the conversation when Draco turned to pull her to her feet. His grasp was unusually gentle, as though she was a fragile doll that could easily break, and she immediately wound her arms around him tightly, burying her face against his chest. The sheer terror of having him captured for so long suddenly came crashing back down on her, and she choked back a sob, willing herself not to break down.

"Granger," Draco's voice was soft as his arms encircled her. His usual masculine scent was intermingled with blood and

sweat but, somehow, that seemed fitting at a time like this. She was just glad that he was here. He pulled back, grasping her face between his calloused palms to stare at her intently. "Are you alright?" She nodded frantically, glad that his body was turned to shield her away from prying eyes. Unable to help herself, she quickly pushed herself up on the tips of her toes, and pressed her lips against his. His lips were warm and intoxicating; she felt his breath hitch momentarily as her sudden action took him by surprise. It was impossible for her to rationalise why she did it, but she figured that if Draco could kiss her in the middle of a destroyed room, then she could kiss him in the middle of a tense

situation.

Draco groaned low in his throat and kissed her back swiftly; nipping her lips with hot, feverish pecks until she was almost certain she had forgotten her name. It wasn't a passionate kiss by any means, just a desperate, relieved one, and Hermione eased back a little when she heard several surprised gasps from the other end of the room.

She smiled up at Draco, her eyes sparkling and bright. "I'm glad you're here."

His gaze softened, and he opened his mouth to say something more. But Andromeda stepped up to them at that moment, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Shacklebolt says it's

alright for the five of you to stay with me," she said to Draco.

Draco nodded, turning to see the guards letting his friends out of their respective cells. Hermione quickly slipped away from his side and he watched as she threw her arms around Theo in relief, before doing the same to Pansy and Blaise.

"But we're going to have to be on total lockdown," Andromeda continued soberly, and Draco turned back to her, focusing on the matter at hand. "Meaning that you can't leave the premises. I'm still in the midst of negotiating with him, so I'll discuss the rest with you later."

"So you're saying that we're still prisoners, just in your home?"

"I'm sorry, Draco."

"Don't be, 'Dromeda," he shook his head, still keeping his eyes on Hermione. Her face was alight with sheer happiness as she conversed with the other Slytherins. She met his gaze across the room, the smile on her lips widening instantaneously and seeming to light the dark room altogether. "I'm sure the others will be more than pleased with the new arrangement."

The stay in the Order's prison had clearly taken its toll on the four Slytherins. Hermione wasn't surprised to see Blaise and Pansy trudge back up to

their room the moment they returned back to Andromeda's house, while Theo headed into the guestroom opposite theirs, collapsing down on his bed without another snarky remark.

Draco, on the other hand, didn't seem tired at all. He paused by the doorway when Grus, the house-elf, brought in Teddy, and Hermione could practically see the array of emotions flicker across Draco's face at that moment. Surprise, relief, happiness and a tangible wave of guilt.

Teddy immediately struggled out of Grus's hands, causing the elf to set him down abruptly. Then Teddy was reaching for Draco, who immediately crossed the threshold to pick the boy up

in his arms. "Hey, Ted," Draco said quietly, and Hermione realised that Draco had never spoken to anyone with those soft tones before except, perhaps, when he spoke to her.

Andromeda watched as Teddy babbled happily, stringing together incoherent sentences as he looped his arms round Draco's neck. "He's been asking for you a lot lately," she told Draco, smiling fondly at the both of them. "You're probably the only other person he remembers."

Draco glanced at her briefly. "What about the Order?"

Andromeda shook her head. "You know the Order isn't what it once was," she sighed, pulling off her coat and draping

it on the nearby stand. "I don't think they'd be very sympathetic to cater to a child's needs. I don't let them visit us often, so it's always just been the three of us. And you, when you drop by, of course."

There was a faint pause as Hermione saw Draco tighten his arms around Teddy, looking almost guilty about his frequent absence from their lives. He wasn't to blame, though. Hermione knew that Draco's position as top Death-Eater was risky in every sense of the word, and visiting Andromeda on the sly was probably a very difficult task.

But she was pulled out of her little reverie when Andromeda placed a hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, would you

put the kettle on to boil? Shackbolt's going to be here any moment now and I want to prepare some tea, just in case. Come on, Draco, I'll show you to your room. I cleared out the room on the third floor for you, I hope you don't mind staying there."

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise at Andromeda's words. Her room was on the second floor with the other Slytherins and the mere thought of not being in the same room as Draco left a weary gripping nervousness in her heart. What if she had nightmares again?

Draco had clearly noticed her consternation, and he paused to smirk at her briefly just before Andromeda led him and Teddy off, a knowing glint in his

eyes as he met her gaze. Hermione frowned, wondering if she were that easy to read, and headed into the kitchen. Some minutes later, there came a knock on the door, followed by the shrill ringing of the doorbell. When Andromeda didn't return, Hermione took a deep breath, steeled herself and went to answer the door.

She didn't expect to come face to face with Neville Longbottom.

He was standing beside Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Luna was behind them, but Hermione's attention was solely concentrated on him. She remembered every bit of him from the yearbooks she'd seen, as well as bits and pieces of the past. Neville had been a constant

back during her Hogwarts days; kind and generous and loyal; but so much time had passed since then. Looking at him was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

She was certain that the shock on his face mirrored hers. "Hermione?" Neville gasped, his eyes wide and round. "Luna said you were - but...I don't understand, when - "

Hermione's lips curled up in a faint smile. "Hey, Neville," she said at last, lifting a polite hand for him to shake.

He shook, as though in a trance, but blinked in confusion. "Luna told me...is it true?"

"I'm afraid so," Hermione admitted, "but it's really nice to see you again."

His mouth was still ajar as he stared at her in disbelief. She desperately wanted to remember everything about Neville, but he was so much a person of the past that she knew warming up to him was going to take some time.

Thankfully, Kingsley Shacklebolt took matters into his own hands and stepped into the living room, glancing around with his sharp, shrewd gaze. "Is Andromeda here?"

"She's upstairs," Hermione said, finding a strange sense of relief to focus on Shacklebolt's question, instead of Neville's disjointed ones. "She'll be down in a minute."

"And the others - "

"They're in their rooms, sir. Would you

like some tea?"

Shacklebolt agreed and Hermione nervously led the three of them into the house. She was more than glad for Luna's presence, and the blonde witch calmly helped her to get ready the cups of tea and slices of cakes, laying the food on the dining table. Hermione could feel Neville's shocked gaze on her throughout, following her every movement closely, as though he could hardly believe that she was right in front of him.

"Kingsley!"

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when Andromeda rushed down the stairs at last, with Draco following her at a more leisurely pace. Neville's eyes practically

bugged out of his head at the sight of Draco, and Hermione badly wanted to laugh.

"Thank you for coming," Andromeda shook Shacklebolt's hand politely, settling down at the table herself. "Now I believe I owe you an explanation regarding Draco and his friends."

"As well as Ms Granger's unexpected arrival," Shacklebolt returned. "After all, we believed that she was killed a long time ago."

"Yes, of course, that too," Andromeda hurriedly said, casting a warning glance at Draco when he made a low, furious sound, his jaw clenched in blatant aggravation. "Hermione, could you please show Neville and Luna to the

living room? And take Draco with you." Hermione barely restrained the smile that slipped onto her face as she headed into the living room, reaching for Draco and pulling him firmly away. He followed reluctantly, after casting one last heated glare at Shackbolt.

Once in the living room, Hermione waited until Neville and Luna had settled down on the loveseat adjacent to the coffee table. Then she sat down on the longer sofa, casting an amused glance at Draco, who still hovered a good distance away.

"Draco, come over here," Hermione patted the empty space next to her. "Neville's a good sort, you don't have to be afraid of him."

Draco looked so offended that she almost wanted to laugh. "Granger, clearly you do not know me well at all if you think I'm afraid of Longbottom."

Neville's eyes widened, but he put on a brave front. "Yeah, well, you're not that intimidating yourself, Malfoy."

"I beg to differ," Draco drawled, but came to sit next to Hermione all the same. He leaned back, draping an arm over the back of the sofa and staring at Neville in lazy amusement. "So, what brings you to these part of the woods, Longbottom?"

"Actually, you're in our part of the woods now," Luna returned, with a smile. "Neville's the new leader of the Order."

This wasn't news to them. Ever since Draco had siphoned the information out of one of the prisoners back at Malfoy Manor, they all knew that Neville was now the one in charge. He was now the face of the Order, even if Shacklebolt still held the reigns.

But Hermione and the Slytherins hadn't a clue as to why Longbottom had to be the one leading. Why not Harry? She couldn't help but voice the question to Neville, who flicked a wary glance at Draco.

"It's alright," said Luna, patting Neville's hand comfortingly. "You can trust him." Hermione smiled at the blonde girl. It seemed that Luna was proving herself to be an extremely loyal ally when they

needed her the most. Her words seemed to convince Neville, who nodded and started to speak.

"Well, the truth is," he said, "after Harry lost the war the previous time, there's been word going around that he's not the Boy who Lived. And that's the reason why he lost."

"What do you mean?" Draco asked sharply. Too sharply. Hermione glanced at him in surprise, but the look on his face was calm, save for the shrewd silver edge in his eyes.

"You've heard of Professor Trelawney's prophecy, right?"

When Hermione looked confused, Luna leaned forward to explain. "There's one with the power to vanquish You-Know-

Who, born to those who have thrice defied him, and born as the seventh month dies. Harry fulfils the requirements of the prophecy. But so does Neville."

"Ah, so the Other Boy Who Lived," came Draco's calm remark as Hermione smiled.

Neville looked faintly sheepish. "When I learnt from Harry that I could be the other Chosen One, I thought that it was worth a shot. Ron and I spent a long time trying to locate the rest of the Order. It wasn't an easy task, but - well, here we are."

Neville proceeded to tell her about what they did in the Order, which wasn't much different from the things Luna had told

her sometime ago. Their conversations skirted carefully around certain topics, like Harry Potter or Ronald Weasley or even the fact that Hermione and Draco were sitting in such close proximity. It was clear that Luna had laid down some pretty strict ground-rules before she allowed Neville to visit. And Hermione was grateful for that. She couldn't imagine what she'd do if Neville personally asked her to join the Order. They left sometime later in the afternoon with Kingsley Shacklebolt. And then Hermione finally had that much needed silence with Draco. She thought of pulling him back upstairs and letting him rest; but he seemed more than content to sit with her, his head tipped back against

the back of the sofa and his eyes shut, long lashes fanning out against his aristocratic cheekbones.

"Granger," he mumbled in amusement, lips quirking up briefly but his eyes were still shut as he spoke. "You're staring."

Hermione rolled her eyes but sidled next to him all the same. His arm automatically fell to her waist, pulling her tightly against him, his fingers threading loosely through the ends of her curly brown locks. "It's quiet now," she whispered to Draco. The past hours had been nothing but bloody and chaotic, and this respite was a wonderful breather at a time like this.

Draco let out a hum of agreement,

pressing his warm lips briefly to her forehead. "Finally."

Theo did a double take when he stepped into the dining room that night and saw Teddy seated in his high chair. "Okay," he said, striding into the room and making sure to keep a wary distance from Teddy. He glared round at the others, who were all having dinner, and took his place next to Draco. "Whose baby is this? Pansy's or Red's?"

Pansy choked violently and Blaise had to pat her back to make sure she was okay. Opposite them, Hermione flushed a vibrant red.

"It's Teddy, you git," Draco replied, the only calm one in the room apart from Andromeda, who was smiling silently to herself as she stirred the pot of stew on the stove as she listened in on their conversation. But then her smile faded as Draco continued, "Nymphadora's kid."

"And Nympha-that's-a-bloody-long-name is...?"

"Dromeda's kid. My cousin."

"I never knew you had a cousin."

"I don't anymore," Draco returned flatly.

"Bellatrix killed her."

An awkward, painful silence descended upon the room and for awhile, there was nothing but the sound of spoons scraping against plates. After Hermione nudged

Draco twice, he paused, looked over at his Aunt and sighed. "Dromeda, I didn't mean to - "

"It's alright, Draco."

It wasn't alright. Draco felt like a massive prick for reminding Andromeda about the past, even though it had been completely unintentional. It was, after all, the best way he knew how to deal with death - to treat it matter-of-factly, discussing it the way he would if he talked about the weather. But Andromeda, he knew, wasn't emotionally detached like him.

"If it helps," quipped Theo, through a mouthful of food, "I'll help to kill Bellatrix for you, Andromeda. When, you know, the final battle comes and

all."

And when Andromeda turned, her eyes teary but lips curving in an amused smile, Draco finally felt a rush of relief surge through him. "That's not necessary, Theo," she said, "but thank you."

"Oh, no, I insist. She sent my Dad on a suicide mission in the past. My Dad's dead because of her."

"And Red's scar was also because of her," Pansy added, from across the table, in righteous indignation. Blaise made a noise of agreement.

"Oh, right," Theo nodded, meeting Hermione's gaze squarely, his eyes holding a fair amount of silent sympathy. "Definitely killing Bellatrix."

Draco smirked, even though he felt his

stomach churn at the thought of killing Bellatrix. It had been and always would be one of the top things on his to-do list. "Well, get in line."

Hermione awoke that night with a silent scream lodged in her throat. She had one of her frequent nightmares again and somehow, without Draco, they seemed more haunting than ever.

Trembling slightly, she drew back the covers and made her way silently out of the room. Her wand, along with the Cloak of Invisibility, was still in Shacklebolt's possession, so she had to feel her way up the stairs. When she

reached Draco's door on the third floor, she knocked quietly, feeling a sudden chill as the wind nipped at her bare feet. It didn't take more than five seconds for the door to open. And then Draco stood by the doorway, his silver eyes staring at her with clear concern. "Nightmares again?"

She nodded, wrapping her arms around herself as she sniffled. "Bellatrix this time."

She didn't have to say another word. He was reaching out to pull her into his arms before she knew it, shutting the door gently behind her and waving his hand to cast wandless Silencing charms on the room.

Draco led her to his bed, pulling aside

the covers and waiting until she was comfortable before lying on his side beside her, looping an arm loosely around her waist. "Better?"

She shifted to press her lips to his chest, feeling his steady heartbeat against her skin. "Goodnight, Draco."

30 | draconifors

3 0
d r a c o n i f o r s

Transforms objects into dragons.

Hermione entered the kitchen the next morning to find Blaise, Pansy and Theo sitting at the table having breakfast. They all seemed far more alert and livelier that morning after a much-needed rest, and Hermione paused to stare in amusement at Theo, who was glaring at the ceiling light.

"Nox," Theo kept saying, over and over

again, "Nox. Nox, damn it, Nox!"

Hermione looked over at Pansy questioningly, who rolled her eyes and shook her head, shovelling a spoonful of cereal into her mouth.

"Ignore him," said Blaise, pushing a fresh bowl of cereal across the table to Hermione. "He's just trying to perform wandless magic. We're all a little lost without our wands, but Theo's taking it the hardest."

Hermione stifled a smile and stepped towards the kitchen wall, tapping the switch swiftly.

Theo paused as the light flickered off, a pleased expression crossing his face. "Oh, hey, look! I did it!" But then he swivelled round, noticing Hermione

standing by the switch, and the smile on his face fell abruptly. "Red! You ruined it!"

Hermione let out a chuckle and slipped into the chair opposite Pansy, picking up her spoon to take a generous mouthful of cereal. "I don't think I ruined anything, Theo. Andromeda says that this used to be a Muggle house, and most of the switches here have to be manually activated."

Realisation dawned on him and he turned around to scowl at Pansy and Blaise, who were grinning up at him with matching, mischievous expressions on their faces. "And you two knew about this and didn't tell me?"

"It took you - " Pansy flicked a glance at

the clock on the kitchen wall, " - twenty-three minutes to figure that out. Congratulations, dumbass."

"I'll hex you, Parkinson, I swear - "

"Please," she rolled her eyes again.

"Only Draco's capable of that level of wandless magic."

"Speaking of Draco," Hermione couldn't help but chime in curiously, "where is he?"

Blaise jerked his head in the direction of the front porch. "Over there, with Andromeda and Teddy."

Hermione craned her neck and caught a glimpse of Draco through the open window. He was sitting on the steps, with Teddy on his lap and Andromeda next to him. They appeared to be in deep

conversation and Hermione wondered if it had anything to do with what Draco had done to save her in the prison cell.

Moments later, her suspicions were confirmed by Blaise. "He's probably feeling guilty about killing off his Uncle," Blaise said, nodding when Hermione glanced over at him. "You know - Rodolphus. Even though Draco's always hated the Lestranges, and he'd do practically anything to save you, Red - I think there's just this little bit of guilt that comes whenever you kill someone, more so when it's someone you actually know."

"He shouldn't," Theo insisted, hitching himself up on the dining table as he ate, instead of sitting properly like the

others. "Rodolphus was an arse and he was trying to off Red. If Draco hadn't stepped in in time, then - "

Theo subsided as Pansy kicked him under the table. As Death-Eaters, they were trained to toss around words like 'death' or 'avada kedavra' every so often, until it didn't make much of a difference to them. But Hermione, who had narrowly escaped death countless of times for over three years, didn't deserve to have that prospect flung into her face at all.

" - then I would have been dead," Hermione surprised them all by finishing Theo's sentence. She turned to them and smiled, a glimmer of soft understanding in her eyes as she recalled the old

conversations she used to have with Draco back at the apartment. "Good people do bad things for the right reasons. Everything's blurred in a war, right?"

"Right," Pansy returned with a smile of her own. Blaise and Theo didn't say a word, but the light of understanding in their eyes told Hermione that they fully agreed with her.

They ate quietly for awhile until Hermione's curiosity got the better of her and she simply had to break the silence again. "Can Draco really turn into a snake?" She blurted at last, remembering the events from the previous day and her sheer astonishment when a black snake had slithered out from his cell.

"Wait - " Blaise now looked equally as surprised as she was. "Draco can turn into a snake?"

"Weren't you there yesterday?"

"Well, yes," Pansy interjected, looking equally as confused. "We kept hearing people yell 'there's a snake! There's a snake!' but we didn't expect the snake to be Draco. Although," and she grinned now, shrugging lightly, "it kind of makes sense that he'd turn into a snake. He's slippery and stealthy as anything."

"So he is really an Animagus?" Hermione asked, glancing round the table for confirmation.

Only Theo nodded. He didn't look surprised at all, just smirking with a general air of amusement. "Yeah. He's

been one for almost three years now. Back when I was practicing duelling, Draco got me to help him. Took a bloody long time too."

"Wait, Theo, so you knew?" Blaise asked, glaring at him somewhat accusatorially.

"Obviously."

"And you didn't tell us?"

"Why should I? It's not my accomplishment."

Hermione laughed at that. Theo was so freshly candid that she couldn't help but feel amused by whatever he said. "But why a snake?" She pressed, feeling thoroughly curious about the subject.

"Because the animal form takes on the traits of the person," Blaise explained.

"So do Patronuses, for that matter. If Draco could cast a Patronus, it'd probably be in the form of a snake too."

"But Draco can't cast a Patronus," added Pansy. "Most Death-Eaters can't. Blaise is one of the rare exceptions. I can just barely manage a non-corporeal one."

Theo sighed dramatically. "See, the problem with Patronuses is that it's always in the shape of an animal. Like, why can't it be something cooler - like a hand with a middle finger pointing up, maybe? I'd have a blast waving around a middle-finger Patronus at the bloody Dementors," he finished, grinning widely when Hermione burst out laughing.

Blaise shook his head in mirth, trying but failing to keep a straight face. "You

know what Draco's Animagus should've been?" He said at last, with an impish grin of his own. "It shouldn't have been a snake, it should've been - "

"A fucking ferret, yeah, I know." A familiar voice sliced its way into their conversation and Draco strode in, rolling his eyes at the lot of them. He pulled out a chair next to Hermione and sat down, glaring heatedly at Blaise. "It's been six fucking years, would you just let that go?"

Pansy chuckled. "I remember that! It was classic. A stroke of genius."

"Best transfiguration ever," Theo declared, smirking wider when Draco turned his glare on him. "Remember the way Moody - wait, no, it was Barty

Crouch as Moody - yeah, anyway, he was using his wand to - "

" - bounce Draco-the-Ferret around the room!" Blaise finished, with a laugh, ignoring the aggravated growl from Draco.

"I remember this!" Hermione chimed in, doubled up in laughter as she stared at Draco's annoyed face. "And Ron was calling him 'the Amazing Bouncing Ferret' - "

The laughter faded abruptly as Hermione's eyes widened. And suddenly, everyone at the table was looking at her with equally shocked expressions on their faces. Draco, in particular, stared at her in stunned silence, but there was something else in

his eyes that made her heart clench, a shade of uncertainty that she'd never seen from him before.

"I - " her voice felt strangled as she stared wildly at the others. "What did I say?"

The silence that greeted her was deafening.

"What did I say?" Hermione repeated vehemently, sounding shrill and almost hysterical now, "What did I say?"

"The Amazing Bouncing Ferret," Theo was the only one who dared to answer. But he looked equally as shaken up as the rest of them were. Nevertheless, he levelled a calm gaze at her, looking her directly in the eye. "You just remembered something the Weasel said."

Hermione dragged in a harsh breath and stood up, her chair scrapping jarringly against the wooden floor. "I, um," she searched for the right words to say but her mind was gapingly blank, and the emotions in Draco's eyes were far too painful to meet. "I have to - "

She trailed off. The truth was - she didn't know. She didn't know what she had to do.

Pushing herself away from the table, she hastily hurried out of the room. She brushed past Draco on the way and felt her breath catch as her skin glossed his briefly. She wanted nothing more than to curl up in his arms, but he was staring at her like she was a complete stranger.

The mere thought itself was physically

excruciating, like someone had kicked her in the gut and sucked all the oxygen out of her, leaving nothing but vacuum behind.

"That's a nice picture."

Hermione glanced up when Andromeda settled down next to her on the front porch. She smiled, glancing down at the picture on her lap. It was the moving-photograph that Blaise had taken of the six of them that last day back in the flat. Hermione traced her finger briefly over photograph, a smile flitting across her lips briefly as she saw herself wrapping a scarf loosely around Draco's neck

before the two of them turned to face the camera. Back then, it seemed like time had come to a complete standstill. The camera had captured that perfectly.

"Isn't it?" She said, almost absentmindedly.

"Yes," nostalgia laced Andromeda's voice. "I especially like the way Draco's looking at you. Ted used to look at me the same way."

"Ted?"

"My husband. He died in the war."

"I'm sorry, 'Dromeda."

"Don't be," Andromeda smiled faintly, resting her elbows on her knees as she gazed into the distance. "If there's one thing I've learnt in this war, it's that life's too short and frightening to gloss past the

things that matter most to you - including past memories."

Hermione cast a surprised glance at Andromeda, who looked rather sheepish.

"Draco told me," the older witch explained, her voice carrying a measure of apology. "He's just worried, Hermione. You have to understand that Draco's terrified of losing you once you regain your memories."

Hermione blinked, a sudden sadness seizing her heart, not for herself but for Draco. "Is that what he thinks? That I'd start hating him if I remember everything?" She asked in disbelief. This was ridiculous. She could never hate Draco, not after what he'd done for her.

But when Andromeda seemed to hesitate, a slow realisation dawned on Hermione and she shook her head, finally understanding what she'd seen in Draco's eyes earlier. While the four Slytherins had always skirted round the issue of Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley, Luna had been frank about it. Over the weeks, Hermione had learnt that she once was in love with Ron - or, at least, everyone assumed they were in love.

"Draco's worried that I'd remember how much I used to like Ron, and that I'll go back to him," Hermione mused, shaking her head slowly, a sad smile curving her face.

"And will you?" Andromeda asked

gently, reaching down to touch Hermione's arm.

The answer was quick and simple, slipping past her lips as easily as breathing. "No. It's never crossed my mind."

Andromeda seemed pleased with the answer, and she smiled down at the girl. "I hope this doesn't sound too forward, Hermione, but exactly how do you feel about Draco?"

Hermione set the photo frame aside, hugging her knees to her chest. "I can't tell you how much I've thought about that, 'Dromeda. In the early months, I've thought that, maybe, it was just a kind of desperate dependence. You know? Latching onto him because I've simply

no one else?"

Andromeda nodded in quiet understanding. "And now?"

"Now?" Hermione let a tiny smile flit across her face. "Now, I remember all the bad things he did. I know all the bad things he does. I think of all the bad things he will do. And in spite of it all - I still want to be with him. I still want him in my life." She looked up at Andromeda, an almost curious expression on her face. "That's a kind of love, right?"

"Yes, it is." Andromeda seemed almost teary-eyed as she drew her arms around Hermione, embracing her in a brief hug before letting her go. "But you'll have to be patient with Draco - I'm afraid he has

far too many monsters in his head to battle."

Hermione wasn't surprised to hear that, because she'd long ago suspected this. "The phials?" She hazarded a guess, and Andromeda nodded.

"Just be patient with him," Andromeda repeated, with a comforting smile. "Just as he's patient with you."

Hermione's mood immediately dipped at that as she thought about her past and what had happened earlier at breakfast that morning. She hugged the photo frame to her chest and exhaled, trying to clear her head of the tumultuous thoughts that threatened to engulf her whole. "'Dromeda," she began, slowly, "do you know what scares me most?"

"What?"

"The fact that I'm remembering," Hermione felt a shudder wrack through her body as she murmured that word. "It's not a bad thing, but it charges up so many - negative emotions in me, 'Dromeda. Each time I remember something about someone important from the past - like Luna, or even Ron and Harry - it just...it makes me sad. And mad. Draco tells me that I used to be close to them, that they were my best friends. And I keep thinking that - if they were my friends and if I meant at least something to them...then why didn't they find me?"

"I don't know, Hermione," Andromeda admitted. "I really don't know."

Hermione bit her lip, swallowing the sob that threatened to escape her throat. "Why didn't they look for me? Draco did - and Draco and I hated each other for years. You did, 'Dromeda, and you didn't even know me well enough. Or did they just give up, because they thought I had died?"

Her voice broke off at the end, and she hastily swiped the back of her hand over her eyes. Merlin, this was ridiculous and she knew that she couldn't blame her friends, but the more she thought about it, the more she remembered and the sadder she became.

"I'm sorry," Andromeda said softly, reaching down to grasp Hermione's hands, "I'm really sorry things turned out

this way."

Hermione wanted to assure her, to tell her that it wasn't her fault at all. But somehow, the words lodged in her throat and she was just tired and sad all at once. A sudden click of the front door behind them made the both of them turn around quickly.

It was Draco, and he looked like a deer caught in headlights for a moment as he stared in surprise at the two of them. Then his gaze turned to Hermione and his eyes sharpened. "What's wrong, Granger?"

Andromeda took that as her cue to leave. She patted Hermione on the shoulder before getting to her feet; brushing past Draco and shooting him a pointed look

on the way. Then the door swung shut behind her and it was just the two of them.

Draco took a few hesitant steps towards Hermione before settling down next to her. His eyes instantly flickered over to the photograph on her lap for a brief moment, and then he shook his head. "Blaise can't work the bloody camera to save his life," he mused dryly, "everything's blurred."

In spite of her tears, Hermione found herself smiling as she remembered that day perfectly. Even though the picture was blurred, that was a day she was certain she'd never forget. Sniffing, she sidled closer to him. She felt his arm wrap around her, pulling her tightly to

his side, and she rest her head against his shoulder as realisation quickly dawned on her. Everything was blurred. The past, their moral compasses, even the picture. Draco, however, was that one person in her life who made perfect sense.

"Everything's blurred," she agreed softly, feeling his grip tighten around her almost instinctively. "But some things are crystal clear."

The next full moon came.

And this time, there was no hiding Pansy's condition.

Hermione heard the screams sometime

close to midnight, felt Draco stumble out of bed and wave her away. He had just lifted his hand to cast silencing charms on their room when Hermione shoved the covers aside and went to him.

"I want to help," she said simply. His features seemed to soften as he took in her pleading look and, after a short nod, he took her hand and pulled her down the stairs with him.

Hermione's eyes widened when they reached the living room and saw nothing but chaos. Pansy was screaming as Blaise pinned her down. Andromeda was seated in the kitchen, trying to calm Teddy as he was obviously terrified by the loud yells and screams in the living room, with Grus the house-elf hovering

near the toddler worriedly.

"Get the Wolfsbane potion," Draco directed Hermione softly, before heading straight towards Pansy.

Hermione didn't hesitate. She rushed to the trunk of potions that Blaise and Pansy had given her for Christmas. After finding a small phial with that precise label, she hurried back. Theo rushed down just in time and helped to pry open Pansy's mouth as Hermione poured every drop of the potion in.

When Pansy stopped struggling, Hermione felt a surge of relief and sat back. "Will she be fine?"

"Soon," came Blaise's brusque reply. There was a glimpse of pain in his eyes that made Hermione's chest pull when

she saw him.

Draco got up and strode towards the door, yanking it open roughly. "Take her outside."

Blaise's eyes widened. "It's not safe. She needs to be in an open area; the front yard isn't enough. If the potion doesn't take effect in time, she'll tear this place apart."

"Where else are we going to leave her? We can't leave the bloody premises - "

"Hold on, Draco," Andromeda said calmly, stepping into the living room with Teddy on her hip. She paused along the way, turning to Theo and holding out Teddy to him. "Would you put Teddy to bed?"

Theo's mouth fell open in horror. And if

the tension in the room weren't so palpable, Hermione would've burst out laughing. "What?"

"Please."

"Fine," Theo grumbled, taking Teddy from her begrudgingly and holding the toddler at arm's length. "Come on, you salivating git - "

"Language, Theo!"

Hermione stifled a laugh as Theo huffed and headed up the stairs with Teddy in tow. Andromeda summoned her wand and held it out to Draco. "Here, take this."

"Dromeda - "

"Grus will take down the charms, won't he, Grus?" Andromeda turned to her house-elf, who nodded eagerly.

Hermione's eyes widened as the house-elf ambled outside, casting silent magic over the premises that presumably took down the shields that Shacklebolt had put into place. Andromeda noticed the girl's surprise and smiled. "House-elves can perform magic that far surpasses our own. Did you really think I'd agree to Shacklebolt's terms of a lockdown without finding a loophole myself?"

Draco smirked from across the room. "I see you haven't lost touch with your Slytherin side, 'Dromeda."

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree now, does it?" Andromeda shot back, staring at him pointedly. His smirk widened, and he held out a hand, silently summoning her wand over and deftly

catching it. "Just go over to that hill," Andromeda continued, "and be sure to stay hidden, just in case."

He nodded but Hermione stepped forward before he could turn to leave. "Can I come?"

Andromeda and Blaise exchanged glances, both of them looking rather unsure. "Red - " Blaise began, rather reluctantly. "I don't think it's such a good idea - "

"Please. She's my friend too," Hermione added, looking directly at Draco.

He didn't seem as worried as the other two, and simply grabbed her coat off the rack, the same one that Theo had magically tinted a shade of green. "Come on."

Hermione's eyes lit up and she rushed forward, murmuring a hasty goodbye to Blaise, Andromeda and Grus along the way. Draco was already levitating Pansy's still form out of the house and she hurried to catch up with him, feeling rather out of breath as they quickly trekked up the hill.

"We've got to hurry, Granger," Draco said, reaching out to grab her hand as she began to slip behind. "She's a fucking time-ticking bomb here."

Hermione held his hand tightly and kept close to him as the three of them scaled the uneven terrain. They were only halfway up the hill when Pansy began to convulse. Draco immediately pulled Hermione to a stop.

"Don't move," he told her, still grasping her hand and assuming an almost defensive stance in front of her. "Just watch."

And so Hermione held her breath and watched.

The transformation was nothing like anything she'd ever seen before. It was horrifying and captivating all at once, and Hermione shivered as she heard bones cracking and snarling noises. Pansy's form curved and lengthened and distorted like a puppet tampered by invisible strings, until she was a mass of dark fur howling at the moon.

"Merlin," Hermione breathed, blinking hard and staring at her friend in disbelief. She'd suspected it all this

while, of course, knew that it was a touchy subject that none of the others wanted to bring up. But to see it happening right in front of her - this was something else altogether.

Draco didn't seem to let his guard down even after Pansy had transformed. Keeping Andromeda's wand poised in hand, he stood protectively in front of Hermione, his posture tense and rigid. "Pansy?" He said, in a guarded voice, and Hermione realised that this was the first time he'd directly addressed her by name. "Can you hear me?"

The werewolf instantly turned in their direction and Hermione felt her breath catch as its eyes seemed to latch onto her. Its shoulders were heaving, almost

trembling, but after a second or two, the wolf sank to the ground, tucking its front paws under its chin.

Draco relaxed and settled down onto the grass next to Hermione. "She's safe now, Granger."

Hermione quickly sidled up to Draco, who instinctively wrapped his arm round her, pulling her close. She looked at the wolf, marvelling the way the moonlight seemed to reflect off its sleek fur. "Is she ever...dangerous?"

"Sometimes," Draco admitted quietly. "When the potion doesn't take effect in time, or when she accidentally misses a dose during the week before her transformation."

"What happens then?"

"She becomes - deadly. She'll start attacking anyone and anything she sees, especially during the first watch. That's why I take it - because I'm quick enough to prevent her from hurting anyone, including herself. Blaise is too fucking soft, he'd much rather she bite him than hex her to keep her at bay; while Theo's attacks are sometimes too potent and might injure her by accident."

Hermione was silent. She thought about how Pansy's affliction had, possibly, brought the four Slytherins closer. "How did she - " Hermione faltered, wondering if it was an appropriate question to ask and finding it difficult to phrase into words. "When did she - " " - become a werewolf?"

She nodded, noticing the way his eyes dimmed as a look of self-reproach crossed his face fleetingly.

"Fenrir Greyback," Draco said, spitting out the syllables like they were a sour taste in his mouth. "He bit her within a month of her initiation into the Dark Lord's inner circle. I didn't even find out until three months later. And by then," he paused, swallowing roughly before continuing, "it was too late."

Hermione slipped her hand through his, brushing her thumb in concentric circles against his skin. "It wasn't your fault, Draco."

"Actually, it was. I knew that she always wanted the Dark Mark ever since she saw it on me during our sixth year. If I

hadn't boasted about it or lied about how fucking great it was, I don't think she would've ever offered to receive the Mark. Then she wouldn't have been sent on a bloody mission with Greyback and she wouldn't have gotten bitten."

But if Draco thought that he had done wrong by Pansy, Pansy herself seemed to think the exact opposite. Hermione had found the girl sleeping in the living room the next morning, presumably having been brought back by Theo, who had taken the last shift after Blaise.

After making the usual pot of tea, Hermione prepared a cup for Pansy and set it down on the coffee table, before going to the cupboard to get a blanket. She had just draped it over Pansy when

Pansy shifted, her hand latching out to grip Hermione by the wrist.

"What Draco said," Pansy said, staring up at Hermione with tired but honest eyes. "That's only one-half of the story. He didn't tell you the part about me owing him my life."

Hermione gazed at her in surprise and sat down on the edge of the coffee table.

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you ever wondered why the three of us seem to like Draco so much? Even though he can be such a massive dick?"

"I've wondered," Hermione acceded, her lips twisting up in a light-hearted grin.

"The thing is - " Pansy began quietly, pulling herself up slowly into a sitting

position. She huddled up, tucking her knees to her chest, the blanket draped over her tired frame. "Becoming a werewolf tore me apart. And not just physically - emotionally, too. For months after, I was just a shell of myself. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I just wanted to die. And I lost so much of myself that one day, I found myself just - wanting to give up. For good."

Hermione automatically found herself reaching forward to grasp Pansy's hands tightly. She'd seen her friend in a lot of moods before, but devastated and suicidal was not one of them. It both scared and saddened her.

"Draco was the one who found me that day," Pansy continued softly. "He told

me that he knew about my condition after having used Legilimency on me several weeks ago, and had been trailing me ever since. And he told me that - that there were other ways to treat it. With a potion. Or with a phial. He made this for me."

She drew out the thin gold cord that hung round her neck, where a familiar-looking phial hung at the bottom. The phial was laced with green studs and Hermione realised that Pansy had possibly magically personalised it to distinguish her phial from the others.

"Draco extracted my best memories and kept them in this phial," Pansy explained, with a tiny smile playing on her lips. "He said that I could view them

whenever I needed to remind myself that there were things that made my life worthwhile, and people worthy enough to live for."

Hermione gave Pansy a hug right after that, and she stayed awhile longer to chat with the girl. But later, she headed back upstairs and curled beside Draco on the bed, smiling to herself when he instinctively wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in his hair and mumbling incoherent words in his sleep. She felt his chest warm against her back, his long legs tangled up with hers beneath the sheets, his steady breath against her neck.

And she realised, at that moment, that she had been right all along. She was in

love with Draco Malfoy.
No second-guessing there.

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p r o t e g o

Blocks spells.

Andromeda's house soon became a safe haven for the five. With the place kept on permanent lockdown, charmed with magic that prevented them from leaving, the five had no choice but to remain within the premises. Only Andromeda had a wand in her possession, and she was the only one who could leave; but even then, it wasn't often.

Some members from the Order visited everyday to make sure that none of them had escaped - they caught occasional glimpses of Mundungus Fletcher or Kingsley Shacklebolt paying a visit to Andromeda, but they all made it a point to steer clear out of the Order's way. The Order seemed to have made themselves explicitly clear: Stay out of our way, and we'll stay out of yours.

It didn't seem to matter to Hermione or Theo or even Draco himself. He was still on the fence with this whole defecting business - it was clear that the Order was never going to accept them, so why bother fucking trying?

He knew that Pansy and Blaise, on the other hand, were getting rather restless.

Blaise read and reread his books voraciously, while Pansy was adamant on brushing up her skills at wandless magic. They wanted to help, and were clearly frustrated by the turn of events.

But Draco wasn't going to start sniffing around for trouble when trouble didn't come knocking. He'd spent three bloody years charging into the foray. Andromeda's place was a pleasant change. He liked that, in this house, they could easily forget about the war or the stupid Order.

But, like everything else, this wasn't to last.

Several days later, he was sitting on the front porch as Pansy practiced wandless magic on him. She was still learning

how to hex without a wand, but it was proving to be an uphill task so far.

"Stop smirking," Pansy said, glaring at him when she tried hexing again and failed miserably. "And could you at least put up a Protego in case I hurt you?"

Draco waved her away dismissively. "Granger will fix me up if you do."

Pansy sighed, before lifting her head to glance up at the sky above. "It's going to rain."

He rolled his eyes before focusing his attention on her. "Rictusempra."

Pansy immediately dropped to the ground in a fit of uncontrollable laughter, and he couldn't quite stop himself from smirking in satisfaction. "You arse!" She yelled, in between helpless fit of

giggles. "You know that I'm ticklish as anything!"

"Then don't lose your concentration," he returned evenly, before lifting the spell off her. She huffed, climbing slowly to her feet and saying something snarky. But his focus was diverted as he randomly glanced up at the sky, just as she'd done just moments ago.

" - and I swear," Pansy rambled on, not realising that Draco was no longer paying her any attention, "someday, when you're not looking, I'll hex your bloody balls off - "

"Shut up for a bit," Draco cut her off unceremoniously, still gazing up at the sky. Something felt amiss, and he could easily hazard a guess that it had

something to do with the Dark Lord. But what? His Dark Mark wasn't tingling - none of theirs had for days now - and there wasn't a soul in sight apart from the two of them.

Seeming to sense the sudden shift in mood, Pansy took a step forward towards Draco. "What's wrong?"

He waved her over, casting a silent Disillusionment charm over the two of them. Pansy felt a sudden force pressing against one side of her body, and knew that Draco had cast a protective shield over them.

"Look up," came his terse voice. She couldn't see where he was, but knew that he was right next to her. "See those dark clouds? You were right, it's going to

rain. But those clouds aren't normal. They're too clustered, too concentrated. Someone's messing with the weather."

"Just clear it up with weather spell - "

"Not the point, Parkinson. I think it's a cover. The Dark Lord used to have me charm the weather whenever we travel in big groups."

Pansy felt her heart sink in dread. "So you think - "

"I don't think this house is what they're targeting. 'Dromeda did say that Shackbolt had this house charmed tight to prevent even the Order themselves from noticing our presence. I think they're launching an attack on the Order." Draco jerked his head quickly in the direction of the house. "Get back inside.

Now."

He didn't have to tell her twice. She ran back inside, leaving Draco on the front porch. The sound of the door slamming shut after her made Blaise look up from his position on the sofa next to Hermione, where he was explaining Patronus charms to the brunette witch.

"What's wrong?"

"Death-Eaters," her voice was raspy and stricken with fear, "they're going to attack the Order."

Blaise's eyes rounded. "What?"

Draco entered the living room, the expression on his face tight. He seemed to scan the room for Hermione, an almost instinctive reaction, and relaxed when he found her. "They're headed this

way," he said flatly, going over to settle down on the sofa beside Hermione. "Where's Andromeda?"

"She went out with McGonagall to Diagon Alley this morning, remember?" Hermione replied, sounding rather worried, "she hasn't returned yet."

"Fuck. Parkinson, try contacting the Order using the telephone."

Pansy quickly ran off to the sitting room just as Theo ambled down the stairs, his hair dishevelled and eyes droopy from his nap. He took one glance at the serious faces in the room and tensed. "What's wrong?"

Blaise swiftly filled him in on the situation. "I think we should protect the Order," he added, after he'd finished

conveying the basic details. Theo's mouth fell open and Blaise hastened to continue, "I mean - if the Death-Eaters take over the headquarters, then that's it for them."

"Are you fucking serious?" Theo yelled, running an aggravated hand through his hair. "The Order tried to incarcerate us, and I'm still furious as hell about the lack of a fucking loo! They didn't even give us a chance to explain, hell, they didn't even welcome Hermione when she returned! And you want us to become their fucking guardians or something?"

Pansy came rushing back, sounding rather breathless and upset all at the same time. "There's no one answering."

"Maybe they're all out," Theo suggested rather lamely, even though he knew it was more likely that no one had heard the call. He just really didn't fancy parading back into the Order's headquarters, or helping the group that had kept him in a bloody cell in the first place.

There was a lost silence for a moment, until Hermione stood up abruptly, an unusual gleam in her eye. "I know how to find out," she said, a faint smile on her face as she turned towards the kitchen. "Grus! Would you come out here, please?"

"A house-elf?" Theo sounded almost appalled, as Grus came out almost shyly. "What's a house-elf going to fucking do -

"

"Hey!" Hermione pointed threateningly at Theo, a very familiar, distinct scowl on her face that all the Slytherins had frequently seen her wear back during her Hogwarts days. "None of that pure-blood superiority in my presence!" She tilted her finger to point it at Draco. "You too."

Draco's glared at her in aggravation, even though his lips reluctantly twitched as he caught the teasing glint in her eyes. "I didn't even fucking say anything!"

She grinned before turning back to Grus, bending so that her face would be levelled with his. "Grus, you can apparate anywhere, right?"

"Yes, miss," Grus squeaked, gazing up at

Hermione with wide eyes. Hermione had quickly learnt that Andromeda's house-elf was rather intimidated by the four Slytherins in particular and had kept clear out of their way. But he seemed to have warmed up to Hermione and she thought he was absolutely wonderful.

Hermione smiled. "I need you to cast a Disillusionment charm on yourself and apparate into the Order's headquarters. You know that none of us can leave this place because of the anti-apparition wards, but you can. Make your way through as quickly as you can and let us know if the place is empty."

"Of course," Grus nodded.

"Be very careful, Grus."

The house-elf smiled and nodded again

before vanishing altogether. When Hermione turned back around, she saw the others staring at her with matching looks of disbelief on their faces. "What?"

"That was - bizarre," Pansy sounded almost amused, but the other three looked rather sceptical.

"Red, are you sure a house-elf can be trusted?" Blaise asked, his eyebrows knitting together in faint worry.

"House-elves are wonderful creatures," Hermione stated, crossing her arms over her chest defensively. "They're very loyal and - " A sudden thought came to mind, one of a house-elf that she perhaps knew in the past but had forgotten along the way. She shook her head, shoving the

thought firmly aside for a moment. " - and they'll protect you if you treat them well. At least, that's what I read in the books," she added, flushing slightly when they all stared at her in silence.

"Please," Theo rolled his eyes. "I had a fucking house-elf once and he couldn't even do anything right."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "That's because someone in your family probably wasn't kind to him," her gaze travelled to Draco and she couldn't resist. "Yours too."

"I was nothing but kind to my house-elf." All of them turned to stare at him incredulously, and he glared back at them. "Fucking fine, I wasn't, but can you blame me? The words 'kind' and

'Malfoy' never go together."

"Oh, but the words 'pain-in-the-arse' and 'Malfoy' sure as hell do," Theo muttered under his breath, prompting Hermione to laugh as Draco once again shot her a peeved look. She was about to say something teasing in return, but Grus returned at that moment, his eyes large and round with fear.

Hermione immediately knelt down to face him. "What did you see, Grus?"

"Death-Eaters," Grus gasped, "trying to break the shield. Grus didn't see anyone above ground, but Grus did see some underground."

"What were they doing in the basement?" Pansy echoed curiously, taking a step closer to the house-elf.

"Refugees," Draco cut in, with a confident nod. "Dromeda was telling us the other day about how the other bases are full, and the headquarters had to house some of them. Grus," Draco strode over quickly and the house-elf immediately fell a step back, nervousness clear on his face. Hermione watched with bated breath as Draco paused, holding a careful hand out to elf. He seemed almost careful, his actions slow and unhurried. "Can you apparate them out?"

Grus shook his head fervently. "Can't. Grus thinks there are too many. And Grus also thinks that they can't leave."

"Anti-disapparition wards in the basement?"

The house-elf nodded.

"Well, that's that, then," came Theo's relieved voice. Everyone turned to look at him, and he frowned. "What? It's impossible for us to apparate out of this house, and to apparate into the headquarters. We've tried our best."

"Not quite," Blaise said, before looking at the blond wizard. "Draco? What do you think? Is there any way we can get them out?"

Draco seemed to hesitate. "There's a way," he acceded at last, in an almost halting manner. "It wouldn't be easy, though."

Pansy grinned. "Since when have things ever been easy?"

Hermione felt a wave of nausea hit her the moment Grus apparated her and Theo into the Order's headquarters. She lurched forward, only to be supported by Theo, who quickly held up a phial to her lips, forcing her to drink the potion.

Instantly, the discomfort in her stomach eased and she heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks," she whispered gratefully.

He simply grinned and shook his head. "Happens to all first-timers. Fortunately, Draco had me prepare the potion for you."

She smiled and grasped Theo's arm

tightly as they made their way through the building. The place was deathly silent, and she didn't know whether there were enemies lurking in the corner. Fortunately, she was assigned to stick with Theo, who could at least cast wandless Disillusionment charms to keep them hidden.

Once they found the stairs leading to the dark basement, Theo shook the flashlight in his hand vigorously. "Lumos."

Hermione chuckled softly. They had to use Muggle appliances because none of them had wands. She took the flashlight from him, flipping on the switch. Instantly, the light flickered on, illuminating the floor below them. "Lumos," she repeated, with a teasing

grin.

Scowling, Theo snatched the flashlight and headed downstairs with Hermione in tow. They soon came to a dark corridor with a series of closed doors. After exchanging a quick glance with Hermione, Theo took a step forward and knocked on the first door.

"Hello? Is anyone in there?"

There was nothing but silence.

Theo frowned and headed to the next door, and the next, and the next - to no avail. But Hermione stayed at the first one, a puzzled look on her face. Grus had said that the basement was filled with people, so where were they?

Tentatively, she reached down to the door-knob, slowly twisting it in a

clockwise direction. But it caught, and she tried a few more times, realising that someone had locked it from the inside. With the Death-Eaters breaking through the Order's shields, these rooms had probably gone on total lockdown to protect the refugees. Without their wands, neither she nor Theo could get in unless the people inside allowed them to.

She conveyed her suspicions to Theo in hushed whispers, and when she was done, he nodded. "Alright, I'm just going to kick this bloody door down," was his simple solution to the problem.

"Theo, if they have wands, they're probably going to start hexing you the moment you do. And you don't know

how to cast wandless shields."

"A little hexing's not going to kill me, Red. You worry too much," he returned cheerfully, before ramming his shoulder right into the door.

It didn't budge an inch.

But it definitely did hurt Theo, who muttered a colourful string of swear words under his breath. Hermione sighed and quickly took out a healing potion from her satchel for him. Theo quickly drank, before silence settled between the two again as they thought of another way around this.

Finally, Hermione took a deep breath and knocked on the door. "We're from the Order," she began, earning a half-quizzical, half-disgusted look from

Theo. "And we're here to offer our assistance. If you could open the door, we'll bring you somewhere safe. We're not going to hurt you, I promise."

Silence greeted her once again. Feeling rather defeated, she stepped away from the door when a voice from inside stopped her. "Who are you?"

Hermione froze. But Theo was completely unfazed. "I'm Harry Potter," he sang brightly, which made Hermione choke as she tried to stifle her laughter.

"What's the password, Harry Potter?"

Theo's smile faded abruptly. "Um...er - Weasel's my best friend forever?"

"Try again, Harry Potter."

Theo mimed hexing the person inside with an imaginary wand as Hermione

sighed. This wasn't going well at all.

Pansy felt like a treasure-hunter. From the moment Grus had apparated her into the Order's headquarters, she'd dashed into the closest room in search for several things.

The first - wands. That was the most important thing. Without their wands, none of them would be capable of fighting or protecting themselves, except for Draco, but even he couldn't send out an Avada without a wand.

The second, of course, was the Deathly

Hallow that they had in their possession all this while - the Cloak of Invisiblity. Pansy had wondered if Shackbolt had returned the Cloak back to Harry Potter, who was, after all, the rightful owner. But Draco had thought otherwise, since Harry was no longer a part of the Order. The last was any and every important piece of information she could find about the Order. Not to spy - well, okay, kind of. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't curious. But mostly to prevent any information from landing into the hands of the Death-Eaters.

So far, she'd been only fractionally successful. She'd found the Cloak, which was now was draped around her and made her feel protected travelling from

room to room. She'd found two lists of mission sites that the Order was planning, and had stuffed that into her satchel. But the wands were nowhere to be found and Pansy was beginning to feel more frustrated as the seconds ticked by.

"Accio wand," she whispered, when she reached the doorway of the next room. She'd been repeating that as she made her way through the last dozen rooms, but her efforts had proven absolutely futile thus far.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, she came to a locked door at the end of a long corridor. It was the only locked one. Trusting her instincts, she placed her ear flat against the door and rapped

twice. There wasn't a sound.

Holding out her palm flat, she took a deep breath and whispered, "Accio wand." The tingle of magic that greeted her fingertips made her eyes widen. Yes, her wand, at least, was definitely inside. The only problem now was getting in.

She took a step back, remembering the location of the room and heading back downstairs. Blaise was standing by the front door, his palms flat against the wooden surface as he placed wandless magic on it. Draco was several feet away sealing the windows with wandless protection charms, murmuring incantations under his breath as he did.

When he saw her, her distorted head hovering in mid-air as she tucked the

Cloak around her, his eyes narrowed. "You're way in over your head, Parkinson," he deadpanned.

She smirked briefly at his pun and pulled the Cloak off, draping it over her shoulder instead. "I need your help. The wands are in a locked room and I can't get in. You need to change into your Animagus and - well, slither in."

He rolled his eyes but followed her all the same. Several minutes later, Pansy watched with blatant fascination as Draco swiftly transformed into a snake, sliding beneath the gap under the door and heading into the room. It didn't take long for him to locate the wands, and the door soon unlocked with a click.

Draco strode out with several wands in

hand. "I'll give these to the other three. Go inside and grab whatever important information you can find," he directed, placing her wand in her hands. "When you're done, go to the basement and help the other two."

Pansy nodded as he strode off, before grinning when she realised that he had more than three wands in the pocket of his coat. Stealing from the Order? She wasn't surprised. It was Draco Malfoy after all, so what else was new?

"Lumos," she whispered, and her wand lit up before she entered the room.

She sorted quickly through the items on the desk, realising that there were dozens of other wands inside. The person this room this belonged to -

Shacklebolt, probably - had clearly been doing a lot of confiscating. She picked up several others and stuffed them into her satchel - if Draco could do it, so could she - and continued pilfering around. Finally, she came to a large safe, with magical locks in place. She fiddled with it for awhile, using her wand to pick away the multiple charms on it, until she felt a familiar voice break her concentration.

"I was looking for you everywhere," Blaise sounded rather breathless, as if he'd been running around the entire building. "You've got to get out of here, the Death-Eaters are coming."

Pansy immediately slid her wand back into her pocket. "They've found a way

in?"

"Almost, can't you hear them outside?"

Pansy strained her ears to listen and, gradually, heard violent sounds of explosions in the far distance, as though the Death-Eaters were trying to blast their way through the shields.

"Draco's trying to hold them off, and he wants us all out of here before the shield breaks," Blaise added.

"Okay, just help me get this," Pansy told him, reaching down to carry the safe. It was far too heavy for her alone, and she shot a pleading look at Blaise. "I think there's something really important inside. I tried shrinking this damn thing to put into my satchel, but it's charmed." Blaise grinned wryly and stepped

forward to carry it, but the moment it was in his hands, Pansy dropped her end and headed towards the door. "Where're you going?"

"To help Theo and Red. Draco's orders."

"What about this safe?" Blaise stared at her, appalled, "I thought we were going to carry it together!"

"Oh, I think you can manage wonderfully on your own."

Blaise swore as Pansy left the room without a backward glance. "If you don't get your arse back here I swear I'm not putting out tonight!" He yelled at her departing figure, only to hear her laugh heartily in response.

"Oh, baby, I'm sure you will," came her confident response and Blaise

automatically scowled because she'd hit the nail on the head.

Hermione and Theo had been having a far easier time once Draco had given them their wands. After Draco had blasted the first door open and ordered the refugees to come out, threatening to use the Imperius curse on them if they didn't, getting the rest of them out had been a piece of cake.

The wards only held in the basement and so, once the group of people had been ushered to the first floor, apparating

them was easy. Theo had used side-along apparition to transport group after group of them back to Andromeda's place. Hermione had been waiting with the remaining people all this time, staying a good distance away from the crowd because she didn't want to be bombarded by questions from complete strangers.

Then Pansy had come along to return the Cloak and provide her assistance, effectively speeding up the process. Soon, Hermione found herself left with only three people as she waited for either Theo or Pansy to apparate back to the building.

But out of nowhere, Hermoine found herself completely deafened by a high-

pitched siren, the same one that she'd heard when she and Blaise had broken into the Order's prison cell. And instantly, her heart sank as she realised exactly what was happening.

The Death-Eaters had broken through and they were coming in.

The three people stared at her in alarm, and she knew her expression probably mirrored theirs. Quickly, she rushed forward and draped the Cloak over them, pushing them towards a small alcove. There was barely enough space under the Cloak for three and she was sure she wouldn't fit in as well.

"Don't make a sound," she whispered, hoping that they could hear her amidst the sound of the siren. "My friends will

be back in a few minutes."

"They can't," said the frail redhead. Her eyes were wide as she glanced around nervously. "The wards go back up once there are intruders."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What?"

"It's to prevent more intruders from apparating in. But it also means that no one inside can get out."

Her heart began to race in terror and her mind immediately went to Draco, wondering if he could somehow, telepathically, realise that she needed his help. Then she shook her head, forcing herself to take deep, calming breaths as she tried to rationalise the situation. The siren was doing her head in, and she could hear a distant crashing sound in

one of the upper rooms.

"Okay," Hermione said to the three of them, "you're going to have to make a run for it. When that side door opens," she gestured to the door several feet away, "I'm going to create a diversion and you're going to run. The road will split at the cross-section, follow the one on the right until you reach the seventh willow tree. Someone will come out to get you. Understood?"

The three nodded, nervous expressions on their faces as they stared at her.

For a moment, Hermione felt a faint rush of something like courage surge through her veins, and she gave them an encouraging nod. "Stay under the Cloak at all times."

Draco was having a tedious time. For the past hour, he and Blaise had been setting charm after charm on the place to delay the Death-Eaters outside, only to have the spells torn down equally as quickly. But now that everyone was safely out of the building, he knew that there was no reason to protect the headquarters any longer. So when a particularly strong spell blasted the front gates, Draco didn't bother stopping the Death-Eaters.

The scream from the siren was now

pounding in his ears, and he was finding a way out of the place because the wards had gone back up. He soon found a nearby window in one of the back rooms on the second floor. He was about to break out of the place and run for his life when he heard a sudden shout nearby above the sound of the siren.

His ears were pricked as he slowly retraced his steps, only to pause in astonishment when he saw Crabbe Senior dancing uncontrollably on the landing of the second floor, shouting angrily as he tried to stop himself. It was a hilarious sight, but Tarantallegra? The only person he knew who used this low-grade spell was Theo and -
Hermione.

In a flash, he remembered the smile on Hermione's face that afternoon when she told him how Theo had taught her the dancing-feet spell. If the spell was cast on Crabbe Senior, it could only mean one thing -

"Draco?"

He went rigid as he heard Hermione's voice. The siren almost drowned out her voice, but he quickly turned, freezing momentarily when he saw her staring up at him from the floor below. There was a look of immense relief on her face as she broke into a wide smile, but he was more terrified than anything.

Hermione Granger trapped in a place full of Death-Eaters was one of his greatest nightmares come to life.

"Granger, what the fuck?" He hissed, rushing towards the stairs and gripping the banisters until his knuckles turned white. "Get up here now!"

Her eyes widened and she quickly rushed towards the stairs, her wild curls in disarray as she hurried towards him. Draco could feel the oxygen slowly returning to his lungs as she closed the distance between them - thirty feet away, twenty feet, fifteen -

And then she halted, a look of frozen horror on her face.

"Granger, what - " But he saw it just as the words left his mouth, a red light in his peripheral vision, a stunning spell honing in on him, too quick, too powerful for him to catch.

"Protego!"

The force from an invisible shield threw him momentarily off balance as the spell rebounded off it. Draco recovered quickly, reaching into his pocket for his wand and sending a stunning spell twice as strong back in the direction it came from, hearing the Death-Eater collapse into a motionless heap.

Draco then turned to Hermione and she seemed equally as surprised as he was. Even though the two of them had practiced shield charms over the past few days, she'd never actually managed to cast one, let alone react so quickly.

Hermione blinked, slowly bringing her wand back down to her side, still looking rather bewildered. "I - "

Draco didn't think. He just reached for her, latching his arms swiftly around her waist and planting a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Thank you," he murmured, feeling her shiver under his lips, her fingers instinctively coming up to grip the fabric of his shirt tightly.

She smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she looked up at him. "Oh, it was fun."

It wasn't just that. Draco felt a pull in his chest as he thought about the million and one things he could tell her. Wanted to tell her. Needed to tell her. The words had branded themselves in his mind over and over again and he could practically hear himself saying them out loud to her. The truth is, Hermione, he thought,

shutting his eyes briefly as he held her tight, when I found you that night in the Quarry, I wasn't the one saving you. You were the one who saved me. And now, again.

And after this, still.

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c o l o v a r i a

Changes colour.

There wasn't a moment to lose after Draco had led Hermione out of the building. The wards were down once outside the premises, and he tugged her firmly to his side, using side-along apparition to get them the hell out of there.

They landed by the seventh willow tree in the blink of an eye, and Draco's mouth

fell open when he saw Kingsley Shacklebolt, Professor McGonagall and Rubeus Hagrid standing with Andromeda some distance away. They were deep in discussion, but Andromeda looked half worried to death, and the moment she saw Draco and Hermione, she immediately rushed forward, wrapping her arms tightly around the two.

"Oh, thank Merlin you're both safe," she whispered fervently before pulling back, her eyes glossy with relieved tears. "I was so worried when Theo told me he couldn't apparate back into headquarters."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but a loud gasp from Hagrid diverted his

attention. Before he knew it, Hermione was dragged away from his side and practically engulfed in Hagrid's embrace. As for McGonagall, she seemed thoroughly pleased and shocked to see Hermione, hugging the girl tightly after Hagrid had released her. Hermione looked almost awkward with the sudden outpouring of affection and immediately latched herself back to Draco's side the moment they released her.

He smirked when he felt her fingers intertwine with his. "Hello, Professor," he drawled, pointedly ignoring Shackbolt and giving a polite nod to Hagrid. "It's been awhile."

"Not long enough, Malfoy," McGonagall returned, a calculative gleam in her eye

and a twitch on her lips. "If it wasn't for Andromeda telling us all that you had done for us the past three years, I would never have believed it even if I'd seen it."

"Why don't we all go inside?" Andromeda suggested, still gazing around worriedly. "It's not safe out here."

"You four run along," Shacklebolt said calmly. "Hagrid and I will stay out here and make sure the wards stay in place."

Andromeda led the way inside. McGonagall immediately began talking to Hermione as they followed, even though Hermione had cast a frantic glance over her shoulder at Draco, who simply shook his head and winked at her.

Draco was the last to head inside, after he'd exchanged a quick, reconciliatory nod with Shacklebolt. Hagrid had taken a step forward for a hug, but Draco was adamant on keeping his distance and shook the giant's hand firmly instead.

"Thank yer fer bringin' 'Mione back," Hagrid said gratefully.

No, Draco thought, she brought me back. If it wasn't for Hermione, Draco knew that his guilt would've continued eating at him, until he was nothing but a shell of himself. But he didn't voice his thoughts aloud and simply accepted Hagrid's gratitude before heading into the house.

The sight that greeted him was one he hadn't expected at all. People crowded the entire place; the living room, sitting

room and hallway had been magically expanded to accommodate everyone. Some of them looked up as he entered and, feeling rather self-conscious, he tugged down the sleeve of his jumper to cover his Dark Mark before looking around for his friends.

He soon found them. Blaise, Pansy and a couple of other people were in the kitchen whipping up some sort of stew that smelled delicious, while Theo was taking care of Teddy. Even though Theo had often grumbled about Teddy, Draco knew that his friend was secretly fond of the kid. And this, right now, was clearly an advantageous situation for Theo as he was surrounded by girls who seemed equally as interested in Teddy as they

were in him, although in vastly different ways altogether.

Ignoring everyone else, he headed up the stairs and found a phial in the inventory, which was in the spare room next to Blaise's and Pansy's shared one. Once alone in the room, he quickly siphoned the memories of the Death-Eater he'd stupefied earlier - Crabbe Senior. After using Legilimency on the man, Draco had learnt several things:

The first, and to his immense relief, was that Dark Lord truly believed that four of his Death-Eaters (him, Theo, Guthrie and Rodolphus) had been captured by the Order. And that had infuriated the Dark Lord, because he'd lost his top Death-Eater and three of his best

fighters.

The second was that the Dark Lord knew that Pansy and Blaise had betrayed him. Fortunately, it didn't matter much, because the Dark Lord also believed that Pansy and Blaise didn't know much about the inner circle.

He was wrong, of course. 17-65 knew everything, thanks to Draco.

The third was that the remaining Death-Eaters had clearly been hard at work, doubling their efforts to recruit new members into the Dark Lord's army. Draco didn't know the actual number, but a rough estimate would place the Order thoroughly outnumbered with a ratio of five to one.

Things weren't looking good for the

Order, but what else was new?

So after retrieving Crabbe Senior's memories, Draco had implanted a false one and escaped the building with Hermione. All Crabbe Senior would remember of the incident was having been knocked unconscious by an unexpected charm set in place by the Order.

Draco now inserted the man's memories into the phial and, after using his wand to mark some words on the surface of the phial, he slotted it into one of the empty cases on the shelf. Then he shut the door carefully behind him and headed back downstairs, where he was promptly accosted by Hermione, who seemed glad to see him.

"Professor McGonagall wants to speak with you," she told him quietly. "And, um - "

She glanced around, seeming almost nervous by the blatant staring from the people around in the living room, so he allowed her to lead him past the kitchen towards the narrow hallway that led out to the back garden. There were still some curious eyes on them, and Draco angled them so that she was partially shielded by him.

But the action forced them into close proximity of each other, and Hermione visibly swallowed as she found herself a hairsbreadth away from him. Her fingers unconsciously tightened on his arm and she seemed to have trouble breathing.

"Granger," Draco murmured, watching in amusement as her eyes dipped briefly to his lips and feeling his stomach tighten deliciously. Merlin, there was nothing more he wanted to do than to kiss her - eagerly, feverishly, hungrily; until she could think of nothing else but him, remember nothing else but him. But this wasn't the time or place for it, so he allowed his lips to tug up in a teasing smirk instead. "You're staring."

"Sorry," she murmured sheepishly, and now she bit her lip apprehensively and he didn't know whether she was doing it on purpose but it was sure as hell fucking with his head.

Resisting the urge to let out a groan, he reached up with one arm to cage her in,

resting it gently on the wall beside her head and stepped closer. Her breathing hitched accordingly, her brown eyes wide and curls framing her face perfectly as she stared up at him.

"Well?"

"Well what?" She breathed, her breath a dulcet velvet fanning against his skin.

Unable to help himself, he lifted a hand to her face and gently dragged a stray curl away from her eyes, tucking it neatly behind her ear. "You were saying?" He prompted delicately, his eyes glinting in teasing humour.

All at once, she blinked and the trance was broken. "Oh, right," Hermione sounded more lucid now, and she placed a palm flat on his chest to ease him away

gently. "McGonagall wants to speak to you. She's out on the back porch with 'Dromeda. I'd stay, but I - "

"But you'd rather help out in the kitchen," Draco finished for her, when she began to falter. "Go ahead, Granger."

Hermione smiled in relief and gripped his hand, squeezing his fingers briefly in gratitude before letting go and heading off to the kitchen. Draco watched her leave with a trace of regret - he should've taken the opportunity to kiss her, maybe see if she'd kiss him back.

Shaking the thought from his head, he strode towards the back door, yanking it open and stepping out. He heard the hum of magic as the protective wards shielded the area around the house, so

faint and quiet it would've escaped him had he not actually been listening for it. McGonagall and Andromeda were deep in conversation, but paused abruptly when he cleared his throat to make his presence known. After exchanging a quick glance with McGonagall, Andromeda stepped towards him, nudging him surreptitiously as she passed before heading inside altogether. Draco paused awkwardly. He'd never been particularly comfortable with the Head of Gryffindor, and her strict, sharp-tongued demeanour had always been a source of intimidation to him, although he'd rather kill himself than admit that out loud. He tried not to flinch as McGonagall

fixed her shrewd eyes on him, gesturing for him to come over. Squaring his shoulders, he took a deliberate, calculative step forward; making sure that his wand was within reach in the pocket of his coat.

Just in case.

"Tell me, Malfoy," McGonagall began, in her familiar no-nonsense tone that he'd heard so much back during his Hogwarts days, "exactly what are your intentions here?"

"What?"

"Andromeda tells me that you've been keeping He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named off our tracks all this while. Searching for Hermione Granger for three whole years. Passing off as the enemy when

you're actually a Death-Eater gone rogue." When Draco didn't reply, she pressed, "are you on our side, Malfoy?" "No," he didn't even need to think. The answer came to him in a heartbeat. McGonagall's eyes narrowed. "You're not on the Order's side? Are you saying that you're still on the side of evil?" Draco's features hardened as three years of memories rushed back in full force. "Professor, you speak about the Order and goodness as if they're one and the same, when they're fucking not," he replied, matter-of-factly, not even caring when her eyebrows shot up at his language. "If the Order is as good as you say it is, why did my friends and I manage to find so many defected

members of the Order?"

"You found defected Order members?"

"Dozens. And we didn't just find them, we killed them," Draco drawled, almost smirking at the look of shock that flitted across McGonagall's face. "Including Martins, a defected member of the Order who became a Death-Eater."

She was silent for a moment and he could almost see the calculative gleam in her eyes as she processed his words.

"If you want, you can view Martins' memories," Draco offered, "we kept them in a phial and there's a Pensieve in the inventory. In fact, we've been collecting a lot of memories, and I'm sure you could find the ones of old defected Order members."

After a brief moment of hesitation, McGonagall nodded and Draco led her back into the house. For some reason, Draco felt compelled to make her believe his words, if only because she was one of the few that actually bothered to listen. Blaise had always said it didn't hurt to have more people on their side. And, maybe this time, he was right.

Draco headed downstairs sometime later, only to see that the place had emptied out by then. Hermione was doing the dishes in the kitchen with

Andromeda, while Pansy had Teddy on her lap, with Grus the house-elf next to her. Blaise was fixing an injury of Theo's, and Shackbolt and Hagrid were standing by the doorway, conversing in hushed tones.

Teddy was the first to spot Draco and he raised his arms. Draco quickly went to the boy, scooping him up neatly and pointedly ignoring the way McGonagall was staring at him.

She smiled in faint amusement and cleared her throat, catching the attention of everyone else in the house, her presence commanding in spite of her wiry old frame. "I think it's time to lift the lockdown on this house," she began, to the astonishment of the other

Slytherins and Hermione. "Hagrid, remove the anti-apparition wards please. And Kingsley, I think we'll allow the five to keep their wands."

Shacklebolt's eyebrows rose high on his forehead. "Minerva - "

"I'm quite firm on my decision, Kingsley. In a war like this, it might do us good to place our faith in certain Death-Eaters."

Draco badly wanted to smirk at Shacklebolt's surprise, but forced a straight expression on his face. Instead, he watched in silence as McGonagall shot him a meaningful look, before bidding a goodbye to Andromeda and heading out with her comrades. He didn't miss the way Hermione kept a good distance from them, as though she was

half afraid that they'd attack her with hearty embraces again.

Once the door had shut, he felt like he could finally breathe. He went into the living room, collapsing onto the sofa and setting Teddy on his lap, his arms wrapped loosely around the toddler. His muscles were aching and head reeling from all the magic he'd done earlier that day, and all he wanted to do was to crawl into bed and sleep for about a thousand years.

Preferably with Hermione.

But his hopes were regrettably crushed when Blaise settled down opposite him on the coffee table and nudged him. "So? What did McGonagall say?"

"She saw the memories of the defected

Order members. And I think she might have reconsidered because she gave us a mission."

Blaise's eyes immediately brightened which didn't surprise Draco at all. Among the five of them, Blaise was the most eager to actually help the Order. Pansy would gladly follow, while the other three of them just wanted to stick together.

"She said we'd have to succeed if we wanted to earn her trust," Draco added, a frown glossing his forehead as he recalled their earlier conversation.

"And?"

Draco shrugged. "And - I told her that I couldn't fucking care less about her trust and that I'd have to ask the rest of you."

"Well, what's the mission about?"

It was a complicated mission, one that gave Draco a bloody headache just thinking about it. And after all the things that had happened that day, he wasn't too sure he wanted to concoct another death-trap mission.

So he shook his head and leaned back against the back of the sofa. "I'm bloody exhausted, Zabini. Why don't you tell me about what happened during the time that I was gone?"

Blaise chuckled in amusement. "You mean while you were in the inventory with McGonagall?" Draco nodded, and he continued, "Shacklebolt set up a Floo network in the fireplace and had the refugees Floo to the other bases. Took a

bloody long while, but we finally got them all out."

"That's it?"

"Er - oh, right," Blaise's eyes twinkled as he suddenly thought of something else.

"Pansy got me to lug back this huge safe from the Order. We haven't opened it yet but we think it's something important. Hold on, I'll get it."

Blaise disappeared into one of the rooms just as Hermione came over, a tray of food in her hands. "I thought you might be hungry," she said, setting the tray down on the coffee table and taking Teddy from him. "There was hardly enough to go round earlier, so if you're still hungry, I'm sure I can make something else later."

Draco's lips quirked up wryly and he shook his head. "It's fine, Granger. Staying awake is already fuc - "

"Language, Malfoy," Hermione reminded, a teasing glint in her eyes.

He rolled his eyes. "Is this going to become a habit with you?"

"Only when Teddy's around. I hardly think 'Dromeda will be pleased if he models his speech pattern on yours and Theo's."

"I wouldn't be pleased at all," Andromeda's voice echoed from the kitchen, evidently having overheard their conversation. "Grus, please take Teddy out before Draco corrupts him altogether."

"I will not corrupt him! For fuc - "

"Draco!"

He subsided quickly at Andromeda's yell, shooting Hermione an aggravated look as she laughed at him. Grus ambled over a moment later and Hermione quickly passed Teddy over to him.

"Thank you for your help earlier, Grus," Hermione added, a kind smile on her face. "We couldn't have done it without you. In fact, I think the only reason we succeeded was because of you." The house-elf looked shy and pleased all at once. He nodded quickly before leaving with Teddy, and Hermione turned back to Draco, raising her eyebrows at the look of disbelief on his face. "It's true," she said indignantly, "we wouldn't even have made it into the headquarters

without Grus. You should show a little more appreciation for house-elves, Draco."

He made a begrudging noise and continued to eat. After awhile, Blaise and Theo entered the living room, carrying a heavy black box between them. Pansy was trailing after them, a collection of wands in her hand. With difficulty, Blaise and Theo set the box down on the floor, before looking over at Draco.

"So? What do you think?"

"What do you mean 'what do you think'?" Draco shot Blaise a sardonic look and turned back to his food. "Just open the bloody box."

"I've tried," Pansy sighed. "Nothing

works."

"Impossible," Draco shook his head, reaching over to test the box with his wand briefly. When there was no faint buzz of magic, he pulled back and set his wand aside. "You've removed all the charms, Parkinson. There has to be some sort of code on it that you have to undo manually."

"There's a dial," Hermione pointed out, "why don't you try cracking the code on that?"

Eagerly, Theo pushed Pansy and Blaise aside, ignoring their aggravated protests. "Here, let me try."

The four Slytherins and Hermione sat staring at the box for awhile longer as they watched Theo spin the dial over

and over in different combinations, until a soft patter of feet broke them from their concentration.

Andromeda's eyes widened in disbelief as she took in the sight of the precious safe. Wiping her hands on her apron, she took several steps closer. "Where did you get that?"

"Shacklebolt's room," returned Pansy, with a small frown on her forehead. "At least, I think it's Shacklebolt's room. We found our wands and a lot of spares there too."

"Do you know how to open it, 'Dromeda?" Blaise asked curiously, noticing the expression on her face.

"I - "

"Help us open it, 'Dromeda, or I'll use

Legitimacy on you." It was an empty threat, but Draco couldn't resist.

And he didn't flinch when Andromeda reached over to smack him soundly on the head. "How dare you threaten your Aunt?" She glared at him in mock-indignation and he simply smirked in response. But after a moment's hesitation, she sighed, kneeling down beside Theo and placing a hand on the dial. "Okay, but the five of you can't tell anyone what's in this safe."

"We promise," Hermione assured her, and the others mumbled their agreement. They watched as Andromeda twisted the dial in a certain, well-rehearsed pattern. The dial gave a short click, and she tugged on the door lightly to open the

safe. Tentatively, she drew out the first object that made all the Slytherins' eyes widen.

"Shit. Is that the - " Blaise was the first to break the silence, just as the tear along the Sorting Hat's brim began to sing loudly.

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty, but - " The Hat was quickly cut off mid-song as Draco shot a Silencio at it. The others turned to look at him quizzically and he simply returned a sardonic look. "You know that once the bloody thing starts singing, it goes on for about an hour."

"Don't exaggerate, Draco," Andromeda chided him gently when Hermione's eyes began to widen. The brunette witch was staring at the Hat in fascination, as

though she vaguely remembered it but only barely. Andromeda noticed the curious expression on Hermione's face and she smiled down at the girl. "Do you want to try it?"

Hermione blinked. "Who, me?"

"Yes. It's a Sorting Hat - it places you into any one of the four houses."

Theo frowned. "But Red was already sorted into Gryffindor," he began, even as Andromeda disregarded him and gently placed the Hat over Hermione's wild curls. Draco removed the Silencing charm and the Hat began to speak.

"Hmm, well, clever, of course - very clever," the Hat drawled, and Hermione looked startled as the Hat shifted on her head. "With a righteous sense of honour,

you should belong in Gryffindor, of course. But, then again, you are an unusual combination - heroic but not entirely brave as a Gryffindor should be, instead depending on your wit to pull through. And so I would say - Ravenclaw."

Hermione smiled; clearly pleased by the Hat's decision, but the other Slytherins stared at her with open mouths. Even Draco looked faintly perturbed, which was an odd expression coming from him. "Ravenclaw?" Pansy looked at the hat in disbelief. "Is the Hat ruined?"

"Not at all," Andromeda returned calmly, even though she seemed rather surprised. "It's been said that the Hat sorts people based on the qualities they

desire, rather than the qualities they actually have. Perhaps Hermione no longer desires the same things she once did," Andromeda finished, casting a swift, surreptitious glance at Draco.

No one noticed the furtive look but Hermione, and as she met Andromeda's eyes and saw the knowing glint in them, she fought the urge to smile. Andromeda knew her far too well.

"Okay, can I try?" Blaise asked eagerly, getting up from his seat on the armchair to settle down on the floor next to Andromeda.

She placed the Hat on him and, without much deliberation; the Hat quickly sorted him into Slytherin. It did the same for Pansy, who went after Blaise. Then

came Theo, who looked rather wary when Andromeda tugged the Hat over his head.

"If the bloody thing doesn't put me into Slytherin I'm gonna kill myself," Theo grumbled much to Hermione's amusement. The room was silent as everyone watched the Hat's tip tilting briefly before it spoke.

"Gryffindor!"

"What the actual fuck?"

Hermione burst out laughing at the look of sheer horror on Theo's face as he all but threw the Hat off him and scrambled away. Pansy and Blaise were laughing hard as well and there was a mocking smile curving Draco's lips. Even Andromeda looked rather amused as she

chuckled softly.

"It's broken!" Theo declared, glaring down at the Hat like it was his greatest enemy. "You're fucking broken!"

"What's wrong with Gryffindor?" Hermione asked, only to have the other four turn to look at her with matching looks of disgust.

"It's Gryffindor," Theo said, as if it was explanation enough. "I'm not going to be in the same house as Saint Potter and the bloody Weasel! The Hat has made a bloody mistake - and we are never telling anyone about this, do you hear me?" He growled warningly at the others, "I was sorted into Slytherin and I will stay a Slytherin!"

"Alright, Theo," Andromeda said

comfortingly, trying to stifle her smile as she picked up the discarded Hat. "Draco? Do you want a go?"

"Draco's brave," Blaise pointed out reasonably, even though Draco quickly shot his friend an icy look.

"True," Pansy concurred, with a smile playing on her lips. "He's no longer as cowardly as he used to be back during Hogwarts days. He might just get sorted into Gryffindor."

And now Theo's eyes gleamed as he sat back down next to Blaise. "This should be good."

Hermione took the Hat from Andromeda and lowered it onto Draco. But the moment the Hat glossed his head, it made an instantaneous decision.

"Slytherin!"

"Damn it!" came Theo's cry of dismay; but Hermione wasn't surprised at all. While Draco certainly was braver than he used to be, she knew that he was far more resourceful and cunning than anything. The Hat wasn't wrong at all.

Draco smirked at Theo's crestfallen face. "Sorry you're not one of us anymore, Gryffindor."

"I'm in Slytherin!" Theo fired back heatedly, scowling at everyone in the room. "Slytherin!"

Pansy grinned. "Aw, don't get your knickers in a twist, Gryffindor."

Theo flipped her off and got up to look into the safe again. He pulled out a couple more things - some papers that

Andromeda hastily grabbed away before any of them could read it, an old blank parchment which Blaise and Draco immediately began deciphering, along with a gleaming object that made Hermione's eyes widen.

"What's that?" Theo asked, staring at it in fascination. The other three Slytherins were staring at it with equal curiosity - they didn't know at all. But Hermione suddenly knew exactly what it was with every fibre of her being; the realisation so distinct and clear that it felt like someone had laid a well-aimed punch to her gut.

"The Sword of Gryffindor," Hermione murmured, before Andromeda could reply. All eyes turned to her at once, and

she swallowed, her throat inexplicably dry and heart pounding against her chest. She needed to get out of there. She got to her feet, muttering a quick apology under her breath and rushed towards the stairs. Her mind was still in a whirl as she returned back to Draco's room - should've been her own, but she'd spent so many nights sleeping next to him that she now considered his room hers as well - and curled up on the bed, gripping the pillow tightly and forcing herself to breathe.

She remembered flashes now, and it scared her. She remembered hiding the Sword, using the Sword to...destroy - what was it? She couldn't remember that. But somewhere in the farthest recesses

of her memory, she remembered other things faintly - going on the run, hiding in a tent, fighting, fighting, fighting.

She felt like she was split between two halves of herself - the person she used to and the person she had become when Draco had found her. Pre-capture and post-capture. How could you ever reconcile the two?

"Granger?" Draco's voice drew her out of her reverie. He was staring at her with faint concern as he shut the door behind him. "What's wrong?"

She didn't hesitate to shift closer to him when he slid into bed and wrapped his arms around her. The thrum of his heartbeat was steady against her cheek and her mind traced back to a

conversation she had with Andromeda several days ago.

"Are you - " she started, haltingly, her voice so low it was almost inaudible, " - are you sometimes scared that I'll regain all my memories?"

He was silent for so long she almost thought that he'd fallen asleep. But then he shifted slightly, his arms tightening around her and lips moving against her forehead as he spoke. "Terrified."

"Me too," she whispered, letting a small smile gloss her lips as she realised that her fears weren't completely unwarranted for. She wasn't alone in this.

33 | relashio

3 3

r e l a s h i o

Releases the target's grip.

During breakfast the next morning, Draco relayed McGonagall's mission to the others, with Andromeda silently listening in as usual. The Order was missing some of its best fighters thanks to the battle at Gringotts and while

Shacklebolt was wary to launch another rescue mission - since the first one had turned out to be such a disaster; McGonagall thought otherwise.

"So she's asking us to rescue them?" Blaise had quickly gotten a good grip on the situation, and his eyes were brimming with excitement. Pansy looked equally intrigued, while Hermione was worrying her bottom lip.

And Theo, like the ever-unenthusiastic, anti-Order, defected Death-Eater that he was, was simply chewing stoically on a slice of bacon.

"Apparently so," Draco shrugged, reaching for his mug to take a generous swig of his coffee. "McGonagall says that they're being held in at the Ministry

of Magic."

"Why not at Malfoy Manor?" Pansy asked curiously. "The Dark Lord's always kept his prisoners there."

"Probably because all his prisoners escaped the last time he put them there," Draco shot her a meaningful look and she immediately knew he was talking about the night they defected. "Anyway, ever since the Dark Lord took over the bloody Ministry some years ago, the basement of the building's always been for prisoners. The Malfoy Manor only houses the important prisoners - but not anymore, I think."

A silence fell upon the table. Only Blaise and Pansy seemed remotely interested. Draco just knew that he'd

have to help them; and by the looks of it, Hermione was only on board if the others were. Theo, on the other hand, was staring at his food like it was ten times more interesting than the subject at hand.

"Would the five of us be sufficient?" Blaise said at last, a frown etched on his forehead. "It seems like a lot to handle with just five of us and so many others to save."

"You could recruit," Andromeda suggested, taking her attention momentarily off the frying pan to glance over her shoulder at them. "Even though Kingsley's not willing to send rescue missions, I see no reason why the Order members can't offer their assistance if

they're willing."

"Draco?" Blaise turned to his friend, who gave another reluctant shrug.

"It's worth a shot."



So after breakfast, Andromeda headed to the headquarters with Blaise and Pansy. They had agreed that Draco and Theo were not the best people to go, considering the fact that both of them had

a knack of saying maddening things that just riled people up. Hermione was more than reluctant to meet the Order, and so she stayed behind as well.

The weather was chilly out, and she had just made several cups of hot chocolate. After handing one each to Grus, Teddy and Theo, who were all in the living room, she brought the remaining two mugs upstairs.

She found Draco in the inventory, hunched over the Pensieve, his arms braced over the smooth rim of the bowl. Draco was never hunched; he always held himself with the kind of confident, almost-arrogant stride, with a grace that she always envied. Even back at Hogwarts. She had her intelligence. He -

had everything else.

He didn't hear her when she set the mugs down on the shelf, and it wasn't until she placed her palm flat against the tight planes of his back when he shifted fractionally. He didn't turn.

"Draco?" Worry had seeped into her voice, and she stepped closer, angling her head so she could get a better look at him. "Is everything alright?"

His face illuminated by the faint light streaming in through the open window, but the normally guarded look on his features were completely obliterated and in its place lay a shade of sadness she'd never seen before on him. And she thought back about all the times she'd seen him display a wide variety of

emotions - angry with a sneer on his face; taunting with a mocking grin; pleased with a twinkle in his eyes; even terrified with the colour drained from his cheeks.

But this - this was different.

His grey eyes met hers for a brief moment before he glanced away. "Yeah, I was, um - " he swallowed roughly, opening his hand to reveal a phial laying on the calloused bowl of his palm, a phial that Hermione instantly recognised. " - memories of my mother."

"Is that the phial I gave you for Christmas?"

When he didn't answer, her heart sank and she reached forward to grasp his arms, pulling him away from the

Pensieve. She remembered why she'd made the phial for him. It was one of the few memories she had of his mother.

Hermione couldn't remember much of her earliest days in captivity, but she did remember being locked up in the cellar of the Malfoy Manor for awhile. She remembered a blonde woman rushing down the steps, dark skirts sweeping the dusty floors of the cellar. The woman's gaze had landed on Hermione and her eyes had widened.

"Look at you," whispered Narcissa Malfoy, and Hermione remembered that the fear on Narcissa's face was mirrored on her own. The older woman gripped pointed the wand to Hermione's bleeding chest. "Vulnera Sanentur."

She repeated it two more times, causing the deep gashes on Hermione's skin to heal and the wounds to seal up tight. When Hermione blinked, Narcissa Malfoy had vanished. She never saw the woman again. The next time she heard about her was from Draco.

And by that time, Narcissa Malfoy was already dead.

Hermione now lifted her gaze to meet Draco's, an apologetic expression on her face. "Draco, I'm sorry. I didn't think that they would get you all upset - "

"I'm not upset, Granger," he shook his head, blond hair falling into his eyes and she reached up to brush it away from his face. "I just - " and he swallowed again, his lips twisting into a hard line as he

inhaled sharply. " - fuck, I just - "

" - miss her?" Hermione supplied, when he seemed incapable of finishing his sentence. He shut his eyes briefly and nodded, and so she reached over and pulled him close without hesitation. "I know you do."

He was silent for awhile as Hermione wrapped her arms around him, his breathing ragged and uneven against her hair, his grip tight and almost unyielding on her. Hermione brushed her thumb briefly across his cheek and placed a soft kiss along his jawline before burying her face against his neck.

"Do you - " when he broke the silence, his voice was low and almost desperate.

" - do you ever think you'll stop missing

someone?"

Hermione thought about all the people from the past she missed, and realised that she didn't quite miss them enough. Because she'd forgotten about them, you see. But then she thought about the people in the present that she loved, and how much she would miss them if they were gone. Just the thought of losing them - any of them - sent a painful stab in her chest, like someone had taken a knife and plunged it straight into her heart, and twisted.

"You know," Hermione mused softly, a sad smile curving on her lips, "I don't think you ever do."

Hermione was seated on the front porch studying a book about Patronus charms when she saw Andromeda, Blaise and Pansy heading down the path that led back to the house. She immediately jumped up, a frown glossing her forehead as she noticed the weary looks on their faces.

Theo, who had been sitting next to her, took one look at them and raised his eyebrows questioningly. "No luck?" He

asked, once they were within earshot.

"None," Blaise sounded rather disheartened as he headed into the house. He strode into the living room, collapsing tiredly on the sofa next to Draco, who had Teddy on his lap.

"Apart from Luna - no one else offered."

"You should've seen the way everyone stared at us," Pansy added, in annoyance, settling down on the arm of the sofa.

"Like we were the Dark Lord's offspring

- "

"Thanks for the mental image, Parkinson," Draco deadpanned; passing Teddy over to Andromeda, who immediately scooped her grandson up into her arms and settled down on the armchair adjacent to the coffee table.

Hermione soon came out of the kitchen with three mugs of hot chocolate that she gave to Andromeda, Blaise and Pansy. She sat down on the empty spot in between Draco and Theo, and offered a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure the five of us and Luna can pull this off," she said optimistically, but the others didn't look so certain.

"Is this what it's going to be like?" Blaise sighed, looking over at Andromeda. "Are we always going to have to grovel in front of the Order for an opportunity to be good?"

"Speak for yourself," Theo interjected, "I'm not grovelling in front of the bloody Order, ever."

"I don't know, Blaise," Andromeda said,

shaking her head faintly. "I think a lot of things have changed in three years, and the Order's definitely one of them." She took a sip of the hot chocolate before setting the mug back down on the coffee table, smiling briefly at the five of them. "Isn't it funny how the four of you Slytherins are far more accepting of change and differences than the Order?"

Draco smirked. "You're a Slytherin too, 'Dromeda," he pointed out and all of them immediately turned to Hermione, who blinked.

"What?"

"You're in a house full of Slytherins,"

Theo grinned. "How're you holding up, Red?"

"I'm surviving," Hermione returned

good-naturedly, curling up against Draco's side as she listened to the idle chatter from the others. She realised, then, that it wasn't so much a place that made it a home, than the people who made it one. Whether it was back at the apartment or here at Andromeda's, she felt completely at ease.

She was home. And that was all that mattered at a time like this.

The next day, Hermione asked Blaise to teach her the Patronus Charm. He looked equal parts surprised and pleased, because neither Draco nor Theo had exhibited the slightest interest in learning how to cast one.

"It's actually not that easy," Blaise explained, when they were practicing out on the front porch. His wand was positioned to cast the spell as a demonstration for Hermione, who looked both excited and eager. "A lot of people can't cast a Patronus, let alone one that takes on a corporeal form."

"Corporeal?" Hermione asked, from her seat on the front step.

"Yeah, watch - " Blaise focused,

drawing circles with the wand before murmuring, almost half-heartedly, "Expecto Patronum." Instantly, a burst of white light shot forth in the shape of a flimsy shield that vaporised just as quickly. "That's a non-corporeal one," he turned to Hermione briefly to elaborate, before clearing his head and focusing again. "And this is a corporeal one - Expecto Patronum!"

This time, the surge of white light was far more brilliant and powerful. It morphed into a wolf that seemed to charge into the far distance for about three seconds before fading away altogether.

Blaise slipped the wand back into his pocket and grinned at Hermione, who

was staring up at him with wide brown eyes. He didn't think she ever looked this impressed back during her Hogwarts days and, truth be told, it felt pretty damn good because this was Hermione Granger, and impressing her always seemed like an accomplishment on its own.

"Clear your head and just think of the happiest memory you have," Blaise said, gesturing for Hermione to pick up her wand. "Then circle your wand several times and recite the incantation."

Hermione bit her lip and slowly climbed to her feet, her wand in hand. "Is your happiest memory of Pansy?" She asked curiously. When Blaise looked at her in surprise, she hastened to add, "I mean,

your Patronus is a wolf after all."

Blaise made a mental note to report Hermione's observation to Draco later on. Over the months, they'd seen a slow but gradual improvement, and Hermione's intelligence was beginning to shine once again. He nodded before shooting her a knowing look. "And your happiest memory probably has something to do with Draco?"

Hermione blushed amidst his teasing and held up her wand. "Expecto Patronum," she chanted, disappointment flickering across her face when nothing happened.

"It's fine, Red. The Patronus Charm is one of the most difficult defensive spells to master, and it's even harder than - "

Blaise trailed off, frowning as he

suddenly spotted two in the distance. "Is that Luna?"

Hermione followed the direction of his gaze, her eyes widening when she saw Luna heading down the path towards the house. Another person was striding alongside her, a familiar redhead with freckles, his hands gesticulating wildly as he spoke to Luna.

Blaise whistled through his teeth. "Draco and Theo are not going to be happy to see one of the Weasels here. That's George Weasley," he added, when Hermione looked up at him for confirmation. It seemed that apart from Ron - who Luna talked frequently about, and Ginny - whom Hermione vaguely remembered; the rest of the Weasley

family confused her terribly.

George seemed to spot the two of them on the porch just then, and a smile lit his face as he rushed forward. "Mione!" He yelled, with the familiarity of a long-time friend. Hermione immediately faltered a step back, but before she knew it, George was sweeping her up into his arms, pulling her into a bone-crushing hug. "It's so great to see you!"

"Hello, George," Hermione smiled faintly, but the moment he let her go, she darted behind Blaise, who shot her an amused look.

"I thought Luna was seeing things when she said that you were back," George said. "She told me what happened. How've you been?"

"I've been good, thank you," Hermione squeaked, her eyes still wide as she regarded him with blatant curiosity. So this was George Weasley. There were faint memories she had of him - of him and his twin brother, whom Draco had told her was killed during the Battle of Hogwarts. George Weasley looked cheerful as ever now, even though he was missing one of his ears.

Luna came up then, her face flushed as she had to run the rest of the way to catch up with George. "Hi," she greeted the other two, a warm smile on her face. "Is Draco here? I told George about the mission McGonagall was sending you guys on, and he's really excited about being a part of it."

Blaise looked surprised. "Really?"

"Yes, really," George said, the smile quickly slipping off his face as his demeanour grew serious. "Ginny's among those captured by You-Know-Who. Couldn't call myself a proper brother if I didn't save her."

"George came back just this morning," Luna explained, "I'm sure Ron and the others would join this mission if they knew about it. But one of the bases got attacked the other day - the same day the headquarters was attacked, by the way - and they're trying to safeguard the other bases."

"Apparently, You-Know-Who's launching an attack on the remaining three bases sometime today," added

George.

"So the Ministry's probably not as guarded as it should be," Blaise quickly deduced, his eyes suddenly bright as he crossed the threshold and opened the door. "Come on in," he called over his shoulder, as he climbed the stairs to find Draco.

George and Luna headed inside, quickly exchanging greetings with Pansy and Theo, who were reading in the living room. Unlike the other Order members, George didn't seem to have a problem at all with their Dark Marks, and he was just about to launch into a discussion with Theo about quidditch when he spotted a familiar-looking parchment on the coffee table.

"How did you get that?" George asked, swiping up the paper and staring at it with barely-concealed surprise.

"We found it," Pansy said vaguely, hardly wanting to give away the fact that she'd basically pilfered through Shacklebolt's things. She half expected Shacklebolt to come round to Andromeda's place any day now to demand for his things back; but since he hadn't, she knew that he'd simply assumed it had all been stolen by the Death-Eaters.

It was just as well. None of them seemed particularly willing to return Shacklebolt his things - apart from Theo, of course, who thought of the Sorting Hat as the bane of his existence and wanted to burn

it on a daily basis.

"But it's charmed," Theo said now, dismissing the old parchment with a wave of his hand. "We can't figure it out."

"Course you can't," George laughed good-humouredly, sitting down on the coffee table opposite Luna and Hermione. "You need the right touch to work it - here, I'll show you."

Apart from Luna, who seemed to know exactly what it was; the other three in the living room leaned over in curiosity, watching silently as George drew out his wand and tapped the parchment once.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Theo began to read aloud the words that

appeared on the parchment. "Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs are proud to present," he paused, frowning slightly as a building they all knew appeared on the paper. "The Marauder's Map."

"That's Hogwarts," Pansy breathed, staring at the map in fascination.

"Every inch of Hogwarts," George declared, looking both pleased and a little sad all at once. "Every classroom, every hallway, every secret passage there is to discover. Every person inside Hogwarts can be seen on this map. Check this out - " he pointed to a particular name, "Alecto Carrow's in the Great Hall right this moment."

Theo shook his head in disbelief. "Yes,

well, ever since the Dark Lord took over Hogwarts, the bloody Carrows have set up base there. But seriously, this is one hell of an invention."

"Isn't it? Fred and I nicked it from Filch's office years ago," George paused briefly, a shadow crossing his face and Hermione knew at once what it was. She'd seen the same emotion on Draco just the day before. The kind of sadness that never waned no matter how much time passed when someone so important to you left forever.

So when Pansy, Theo and Luna had taken the map aside to study it further, Hermione lingered behind, struggling to find the right words to say to comfort him. "I'm sorry about Fred," she said

simply, a faint, sad smile curving her face as she looked up at George.

He looked rather wistful for a moment before shaking his head. "It's fine, 'Mione," he said, before adding, "I'm sorry about Crookshanks, by the way."

"Crookshanks?"

"Your cat? It died some months after we lost you."

"Oh." Hermione vaguely recalled a ginger-coloured, rather ugly looking cat that she had once been rather fond of. But a lot of her past life seemed foreign to her, and every emotion or thought or feeling she once had often seemed like they belonged to a stranger.

Hermione supposed she missed Crookshanks, but she couldn't miss

something that she could barely remember having to begin with.

Draco strode into the living room at that moment, Blaise trailing after him, and took his seat on the arm of the sofa next to Hermione. "Loony," Draco greeted, tossing her a dismissive nod before doing the same to George. "One-eared Weasel."

Hermione audibly gasped. "Draco!"

George, on the other hand, seemed thoroughly amused to see him and simply grinned. "Don't worry about it, 'Mione. The only reason why I'm putting up with Ferret-Malfoy is because he saved me two years ago instead of killing me like he should have."

All eyes promptly swivelled to Draco,

who shot George a cold glare. "I didn't."
"Yes, you did. Remember that battle at Whitehall? You took me down with a Stupefy before I could get killed by Bellatrix. Don't think I forgot that."

"Oh, Draco did the same for me too," Luna chimed in, looking absolutely pleased now, "otherwise, I would've been dead."

"I would've killed you if it were necessary," Draco shot back evenly, "now shut up about it. And Granger - stop looking at me like that, I didn't save anyone."

Theo chuckled. "Draco Malfoy - a fucking hero? Never thought I'd live to see the day."

Getting into the Ministry of Magic was easy.

Draco knew the grounds of the place fairly well, since he used to pass on new laws to the Ministry back when he was under the Dark Lord's orders. They had split up as usual - the Weasley twin, with his reckless behaviour and Theo, with his equally reckless behaviour were to create diversions on the first floor.

Pansy and Blaise were to hunt for important information in the upper rooms and put down any Death-Eater guarding the place, while Hermione and Luna were tasked with freeing as many captives as they possibly could.

Draco, on the other hand, knew exactly where the most important prisoners were held. He headed straight for Pius Thicknesse's office all the while under a Disillusionment charm. The Imperiused Minister for Magic was, as he'd predicted, seated stolidly behind his desk. But the moment the explosion resonated throughout the building, Thicknesse and his other colleagues ran out of the room to investigate, with shouts of horror and anger along the

way.

Draco smirked. So he'd always thought that the Weasley twin - like the rest of the other Weasleys - was an absolute git, but it seemed like his Decoy Detonators had worked brilliantly.

Swiftly, Draco shut the doors across the room with his wand, sealing them tight with charms. He strode towards Thicknesse's desk; a contraption that he was certain Thicknesse himself knew how to operate. After reciting several complicated incantations under his breath, Draco tapped the paperweight thrice and quickly stepped back. Instantly, the desk shifted to split itself into two equal halves. A shelf of papers stacked in a neat row emerged from

within, notes that held important information about the record of each and every Death-Eater that the Dark Lord had recruited.

Draco thumbed through the notes quickly, feeling a surge of relief when he realised that his and Theo's files were still inside, along with Guthrie's and Rodolphus's. He'd been wondering if the Dark Lord had been onto their trail ever since the night they defected, especially since he hadn't felt his Dark Mark burn since.

But now he knew that they were safe - at least for now; and the only reason why their Marks no longer burned was because the Dark Lord had probably cut off his connection to them, having

presumed them dead.

Pansy and Blaise, however, were officially wiped from the record, and Draco knew that he'd have to watch out for them. Their lives were at stake, and one wrong move could destroy not just 17-65, but the rest of the Order as well.

Draco soon left the notes alone, heading towards the piece of wall behind the desk. Even if Thicknesse knew what was inside the desk, he had no idea that there was something else behind his desk. Of course, as someone cast under an Imperius curse for years, Pius Thicknesse really didn't know a lot of things, and Draco suspected that the Dark Lord secretly revelled in having the Minister for Magic twisted around

his thumb.

Holding the tip of the wand taut against the wall, he found that the initial tingle of magic was no longer present, thanks to the incantation he'd recited earlier. He drew an inverse S-shape with his wand and murmured, "Alohomora."

This time, the walls slid open to reveal a large secured cell, with a square window barely a few inches wide. Draco ignored the window, instead undoing the complicated locks on the door. And when the door was unlocked, he wasn't at all surprised to see a red-haired, freckled-face, puffy-eyed girl staring back at him with a horrified expression on her face.

He smirked. "Hello, Weaselette."

Blaise hadn't even known what hit him until he found ropes twisting tightly into his skin, so tight he could barely breathe. He cursed at himself as he felt himself being dragged across the corridor towards the Death-Eater waiting at the end - it was his fault, really, for forgetting to recast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. He'd gotten so carried

away in his search for new information about the Dark Lord's army that he'd entirely disregarded self-preservation.

But when the Death-Eater flipped up his mask and stared down at him in disbelief, Blaise wondered if perhaps things had taken a turn for the better.

"Zabini?"

Blaise grinned, even though he maintained a tight grip on his wand.

"Pritchard. Good to see you again, mate."

Graham Pritchard blinked in confusion.

"Merlin, did you really defect? The Dark Lord's furious as hell. What're you doing here?"

"If you want to kill me, you may as well get along with it," Blaise returned

calmly, knowing that it probably wasn't the wisest decision to let spill about the Order, or the other two Death-Eaters that had defected alongside him and Pansy.

Graham tensed. After what seemed like forever and a hell of an internal debate going on in his head, he fell a step back, shaking his head slowly. "You saved my life once, Zabini. I suppose - I can look the other direction this time. Relashio."

Instantly, Blaise felt the ropes around him loosen marginally and he exhaled in relief.

Graham pointed to the hallway down the left. "There's an exit there. The Death-Eaters are coming in from the other side."

"Thanks."

"I hope I won't see you around, Zabini."

Graham apparated away without another word, and Blaise quickly took the opportunity to shove the ropes off himself, before hiding in an alcove, lighting the phials to signal the rest of 17-65. As far as he was knew, he'd had a lucky escape this time round but he wasn't a cat with nine lives. Graham Pritchard was the first of many Death-Eaters that had made their way into the Ministry of Magic, and it was time to get the hell out of there.

Fast.

Draco thought that if there was one species on this earth that needed to go extinct, it had to be the Weasels. The whole damn family. Ronald the fucking Weasel was already idiotic enough, not to mention his chatterbox of a brother George; but this shrill, aggravating fiery-haired girl in front of him took the icing off the fucking cake altogether.

"You can't just barge in here and pretend to save me when you're obviously a Death-Eater!" Ginny yelled, for the millionth time. "Just get away from me!"

And Draco rolled his eyes for the millionth time and wondered if Hermione would ever forgive him if he hexed her friend. "Trust me, Ginevra," he drawled, trying to get a firm clamp on his temper. His phials were burning and time was running out. "That's the one thing I want to do most. Unfortunately, your stupid brother is out there fighting off Death-Eaters to save your sad little life - "

"Which brother?"

Draco blinked. He could see that she'd been through a fair amount of torture - though nothing compared to what Hermione had gone through - but Ginny was now looking far more alert than she had mere seconds ago. "Huh?" He

blurted stupidly.

"My brother, Malfoy," she snapped, "which brother is it?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, why does it matter?" Then he paused as he suddenly remembered. Perhaps one of her brothers meant more to her than the other - probably the last twin, given that his counterpart had died in the war three years ago. But what was his name again? There were just too many fucking Weasels populating this earth.

"The one-eared one," was all he managed to come up with at last.

Ginny's face contorted with something akin to anger. "You take that back!" She spat, "how dare you say that about George?"

Draco rolled his eyes. Taking a deliberate step closer to Ginny, he ignored her screams and futile attempts to hit him. "You know, Ginevra, I've always wanted to stun a Weasley - "

"Don't you bloody dare, Malfoy - "

"Oh, too late," Draco smirked as she slumped forward, completely knocked out by his spell. Thank Merlin, because she was annoying as anything and he knew that her screams were just attracting attention.

He reached forward to grab Ginny by the waist, holding the girl tightly as they apparated the hell out of the building. Ronald the Weasel and Saint Harriet Potter had better fucking kiss his feet for doing this.

34 | silencio

3 4

s i l e n c i o

Silences target.

When Draco apparated back to Andromeda's house, he barely had time to set the motionless Ginny down on the floor before a familiar figure rushed at him. Hermione's brown eyes were wide, her grip almost too tight, sheer relief flitting across her face as she stared up at him.

"Thank Merlin you're safe," she said fervently, loosening her grip after she'd hugged him tightly. But one of her hands still latched onto the sleeve of his jacket and she looked reluctant to let him go entirely.

Not that he was complaining. Hermione was entirely expressive about her feelings and he secretly liked that, envying her because he could never have the courage to do the same. He just wasn't raised in a family that openly expressed their affections, and things like these had always made him uncomfortable.

With Hermione, however, it was almost different.

Draco cast a swift glance around and,

when he realised that no one else was in the living room, reached down to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. "Where're the others?"

Hermione quickly updated him on the situation. Since Blaise had been the first one to light the phials and alert everyone else, he and Pansy were also the first to return. Then Luna had used side-along apparition to bring Hermione back.

"Luna said the Order would be glad to see their rescued members, so she and Blaise and Pansy brought them back first," Hermione added, once she was finished. "'Dromeda went along with them too. I've been waiting for you, Theo and George."

A flicker of doubt entered Draco's eyes

as he pulled back abruptly from Hermione. "They're not back yet?"

"No." Hermione bit her lip, casting a glance at Ginny Weasley, who lay in a motionless heap on the floor. "Is she alright?"

"She's fine." Draco quickly levitated Ginny over to the bed in the guest room before heading back out. "I should probably get Theo - "

The words were barely past his lips when the sounds of apparition made both Draco and Hermione whirl around. George stumbled in, supporting a battered Theo who walked with a bad limp, crimson blood streaking down one side of his face. Hermione gasped, rushing into the kitchen to get the healing

potions while Draco immediately stepped forward to support Theo on his other side.

"What happened?"

"Oh, you know," Theo shrugged, "we had a tea party with the Dark Lord. Ate biscuits and fruitcake and all. Had a bloody lovely time."

Draco felt the urge to hex his friend, and he supposed that if Theo weren't so beaten up, he would've genuinely considered it.

"The Death-Eaters couldn't see where we were, because Theo had put Disillusionment charms on the both of us," George explained, setting Theo down on the armchair. "So they destroyed the building. Theo here

pushed me out of the way and got himself hurt instead."

Theo rolled his eyes at George, before lurching forward to cough out a mouthful of blood on the floor. "Seems like the Weasley family owes a lot to a bunch of Slytherins - "

"Oh, Ginny!" George's eyes widened and he turned to Draco. "Did you - "

"Guest room." Draco pointed to the room on the left and George quickly abandoned the conversation, rushing inside to check up on his sister.

Hermione came hurrying out of the kitchen then, balancing a tray of potions in one hand and using her wand to levitate a basin of water in the other. Draco felt a strange wave of pride

seeing how adept she had become at magic. He watched silently as she quickly cleaned Theo's wounds, using a Ferula to bind his sprained ankle and, with her strictest voice, ordered him to drink some blood-replenishing potions. Theo grumbled a lot, but Hermione had a knack of making him listen to her, and she was soon easing him back onto the sofa, using it as a makeshift bed for him. Draco made sure to smirk every time Theo shot a scowl his way, because he'd known Theo for long enough to tell that his friend secretly enjoyed being fussed over.

Leaving Hermione to tuck Theo in with a spare blanket, Draco headed into the kitchen to boil a fresh pot of tea. He

hunched over the stove for awhile, using the small window of silence to just let his mind race. There were so many things that cluttered his mind lately - which was about the worst thing that could happen to a skilled Occlumens like him. It was a good thing that he wasn't by the Dark Lord's side - he was certain that with the turbulence of emotions and thoughts within him, the Dark Lord would be able to navigate through his mind in a split second.

But there were just too many things to think about, too many things happening all at once. There was his mother, of course - he'd initially thought that he'd completely gotten over her death. But viewing the phial Hermione had given

him made him realise that his grieving period was not yet over - it had never been over. He missed his mother more than ever, and the fissures of his heart had not quite glued themselves back together yet.

Then there was 17-65, which was gradually finding its place in the Order - but he knew for a fact that joining the bloody Order was completely out of the question. The four Slytherins just didn't belong; they never would, because they were not above using any of the Unforgivables if the situation called for it. Clearly, their ideals were vastly different.

When it came to Hermione, it was another matter altogether. Slowly but

surely, Hermione Granger was finding her way back to the person she used to be; although she'd made it explicitly clear to all the Slytherins on multiple occasions that she was going nowhere.

Pansy had secretly confided in Draco that even if Hermione regained back all her memories and regained the same aptitude she had in magic, Hermione would never be exactly the same way she once was. Something had shifted in all of them because of the war, and they'd all lost a bit of their old selves over the three years.

Hermione no longer seemed as quick to judge, but a part of him often wondered if she had the same strict moral compass that she'd always upheld during her

Hogwarts years. There was always still that lingering unease he felt whenever he thought about how much she didn't know, and how much she'd hate him if she did. Draco had a strong sense of self-preservation and, naturally, feared many things, but Hermione hating him and leaving him had quickly become one of his greatest fears. And if -

"Draco?" He immediately wrenched himself from the labyrinth of his thoughts when he heard Hermione's voice. She was heading into the kitchen, her forehead furrowed in faint concern as she studied him. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, just - " he waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. " - thinking."

"The kettle's boiling."

"Right."

He hadn't even noticed, and he willingly stepped aside when she eased him away, reaching over to turn off the fire. She surprised him with a teasing nudge, her eyes sparkling in good humour. "Just because you're smart doesn't mean you have to keep thinking all the time."

He smirked at her offhanded compliment. "You think I'm smart?"

"Draco, when have I ever thought otherwise?"

"But in Hogwarts - "

"I thought you were insufferable," Hermione returned easily, grinning when he narrowed his eyes at her before turning back around to focus on making the tea. "But I've always thought that you

were clever. I just didn't tell you that because I didn't think you needed an ego boost."

"And you think I need one now?"

"You think far less of yourself now than you did before, don't you?" She pointed out simply. And when he didn't reply, she turned to smile at him softly. "That's why you have me to remind you."

When Draco saw Ginny in the living room the next morning, he couldn't help but regard her with suspicion. The redhead had been more than difficult to

handle the day before, and he hardly wanted her to start screaming her head off again.

Andromeda was fixing Ginny's wounds as the two talked in hushed tones, but the moment Andromeda saw Draco hovering by the stairs, she pulled away and smiled warmly at him. "Morning, Draco."

Draco mumbled an arbitrary greeting in reply. He'd never been a morning person. So when Ginny flashed him a blindingly bright smile, he almost fell over in shock. "Hello, Malfoy."

"What the fuck - "

"Language!"

Draco shot his aunt a sardonic look. "Teddy's not here, 'Dromeda."

"Oh," Andromeda looked almost sheepish as she cast a quick glance around the room before realising that Teddy was outside in the garden with Grus. "Well, play nice, Draco. And let me take this," she plucked the wand neatly from his grasp as she passed him on the way to the kitchen. "Just in case." She left the two of them in the living room. Ginny nodded at him rather amicably and gestured to the empty armchair opposite her. "Take a seat, Malfoy."

"Stop being so fucking nice to a Malfoy, Weaselette, it doesn't suit you," Draco said, deciding that the blunt approach was possibly the best way to deal with her. Honestly, he didn't know what the

redheaded witch had up her sleeve, but judging by the way she was staring up at him with blatant curiosity, he knew that the quicker she was out, the better.

"Well, I figured I'd be a little more tolerant this time - I mean, you did save my life, after all."

"Oh, so that's what I was trying to do," Draco deadpanned. "I could've sworn I was trying to kill you."

"I wouldn't put it past you, Malfoy. We all know what a liability you are," she added, with a challenging glint in her eye. But then she offered a reconciliatory smile. "Verbal sparring aside, I just wanted to thank you for what you did yesterday. I was - " she paused, her smile wavering as a glimpse of a

shadow crossed her face, " - almost going to give up. Almost."

Draco felt thoroughly uncomfortable with the gratitude laced in Ginny's voice, and he instinctively felt the need to snipe back with some form of retort. Which he did. "Less than three weeks of torturing and already on the brink of death?" He raised an eyebrow. "What about that tenacity you Gryffindors speak so highly of?"

She rolled her eyes. "Regardless, I'd still like to thank you."

Draco simply gave her a dismissive nod in return and settled down in the armchair. Then there was a brief pause, which Ginny soon broke after mere seconds.

"So, is it true?" Draco's eyes drifted to her and she shrugged. "About you and three other Death-Eaters defecting and taking care of Hermione. Andromeda told me that the four of you have nothing but good intentions, but I'd much rather like you to explain it to me."

"Why?"

"I might believe you if I heard it with my own ears."

"We're not here for you to believe," Draco shot back smoothly, feeling rather aggravated by her words now. "We're not here to fucking prove ourselves to the bloody Order. Yes - we've defected; and yes - Granger's one of us now. Make of that what you will."

Ginny calmly inspected her fingernails

before looking back up at him. "You risked your lives on a mission McGonagall set for you. Sounds a lot like proving to me."

"You're just as insipid as your brother," Draco sounded almost bored now. "We'd be proving ourselves to the bloody Order if we tried to be good people. But we're bloody not - the four of us would very willingly use any of the Unforgivables if the situation called for it. I don't think McGonagall would be particularly pleased if she knew about how many Ministry members died just so you could be saved yesterday."

"The Unforgivables," Ginny repeated, her eyes almost lit with a strange sort of intrigue. "Really? So you weren't joking

when you told my brother that you'd kill him if necessary?"

"I'd kill any of the Weasel family if the situation called for it - including and especially the Weasel himself," he offered graciously, a smirk curving on his lips when a flicker of doubt flashed on Ginny's face.

"You wouldn't."

Draco almost rolled his eyes at her optimism. Stupid Gryffindors and their wishful thinking that everyone was bloody good. "Okay, Weaselette, I'll spell it out for you," he said flatly, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on his knees. "You see a member of the Order in one of the Order's old bases. He's sneaking around, and then you see

him slip into saint Potter's room and leave with the Cloak of Invisibility - "

Ginny's eyes widened and she opened her mouth to speak, but Draco raised a hand to cut her off before she could.

" - so you corner him at the stairwell and realise that he's working for one of the Death-Eaters. If you send him back to the Dark Lord's army, he's going to rat about having being found out. If you erase his memories, you know that he's still going to have to be a part of the Dark Lord's army with that Dark Mark on his arm. Either way - he's still a member of the Order turned rogue. So what do you do?"

Ginny was silent, but he could see the cogs whirring in her head and knew that

she was actually, finally, internalising what he had to say.

"You kill him," Draco finished simply and leaned back. "I'm not asking you to use an Avada. I'm just saying that you have to understand why we do it. Granger does."

Ginny studied her fingers intently for a long moment before dragging a deep breath and looking up at him. "So, hypothetically," she started hesitantly, "if one were to - say, join your team...how would one go about it?"

Draco was so stunned that he half thought he'd misheard. "What?"

She shrugged. "I'm saying - I'd like to help with future missions. George told me how you planned it and I have to say

that I'm pretty impressed that seven of you managed to pull this off so effectively. The Order's always been about full-frontal battles, but You-Know-Who's army's far too huge for us succeed."

"So you want to help us?" Draco repeated, still sounding rather disbelieving. Ginny Weasley actually wanted to join them? Merlin, he'd give anything to see Potter's and the Weasel's face right now.

"Why not? Besides - when it comes to the killing curse, I don't think I'm entirely against the use of it," she grinned when Draco's eyebrows rose. "I think there are more painful ways to go, and the Avada's possibly the quickest and least painful of

all, don't you think?"

Draco couldn't agree more. If he had to pick a way to go, it had to be by an Avada.

He was about to speak when a familiar voice interrupted his thoughts and momentarily distracted him from the conversation. Hermione was awake and she had wandered into the kitchen to greet Andromeda. Draco stared at Hermione's bushy mane and oversized shirt (it was his) for a moment before turning back to Ginny, who was looking far more elated now at the sight of her old friend.

Lowering his voice, Draco spoke to Ginny before Hermione entered the living room. "How much has 'Dromeda

told you about Hermione?"

A surprised frown slipped onto Ginny's face, but there was a glimmer of understanding in her eyes. "A brief breakdown. George has told me some things too. I'll be tactful, don't worry."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Just hold yourself back from being the over-affectionate Gryffindor and you'll be fine."

"What is it with you and your hatred for Gryffindors?"

"I don't have a hatred for them - but Slytherins are better than Gryffindors, the same way pure-bloods are better than half-bloods or muggle-borns. It's a superiority complex."

"Ah, so you admit that it's a complex and

not the truth," said Hermione, as she sauntered into the living room. She didn't seem to notice Ginny and headed straight towards Draco, settling down on the arm of his chair and handing a cup of coffee to him.

"I'm not a complete prick, Granger, I can see where I went wrong," Draco mumbled into his coffee mug.

"Yes, that's definitely - " and Hermione abruptly trailed off as she suddenly noticed the redhead in the room. Her eyes widened. "Oh, hello, Ginny."

Ginny didn't miss the way Hermione's hand slid down to grasp Draco's arm. Keeping her surprise at bay, Ginny smiled back at her old friend. "Hermione. It's great to see you again."

Draco felt almost awkward in the presence of Hermione and Ginny, the latter of whom was clearly one of Hermione's oldest and closest friends. He made to get up, but Hermione tightened her grip on him and shot him a desperate look, so his escaping plans immediately went out the window. So he simply made room in the chair and tried to ignore the flush heat of her body as she happily curled up beside him to talk to Ginny. Midway through, Hermione finished her portion of coffee and he automatically passed his mug to her. Keeping a half-hearted attention on the conversation, he summoned the Marauder's Map that George had left with them the day before and studied it.

Even though George had told him that it had been an invention of saint Potter's father, Draco couldn't help but regard the Map with begrudging respect. It was clever, and he wondered if it could be replicated somewhere else.

Malfoy Manor, for instance, as well as the rest of the Dark Lord's bases. That way he could know where the Death-Eaters were at any point of time.

Yes - that sounded like a good idea, and he stored that as something he'd run by with the rest of 17-65. He was certain that they could come up with a way to track the Dark Lord's army - including and especially the Peverells.

Hermione's conversation with Ginny soon came to an end - he couldn't help

but realise that it had been a more or less one-sided conversation with tense silences that Ginny had tried desperately to fill - and he watched as Hermione excused herself the moment Theo came downstairs, yawning in his usual loud, obnoxious fashion.

The other two Slytherins soon joined Theo, Hermione and Andromeda in the kitchen, but Draco lingered behind to focus on Alecto and Amycus Carrow's footsteps for awhile longer. After shoving aside the flare of anger when he thought about what they'd done to Hermione, he stored the Map away and looked down at Ginny, who was currently reading a random book about Herbology.

"Are you coming for breakfast?"

Ginny shook her head. "In a bit." He turned to leave but she waved out a hand to stop him, gesturing for him to take a seat and setting the book down beside her.

"So, Malfoy, tell me," she began and he absolutely loathed the gleam in her eye. "How long have you been in love with Hermione Granger?"

"This is getting ridiculous," Theo said in the kitchen, as he scowled at the sight of Ginny in the living room talking to

Draco. "Since when did this place become a safe-house for the Weasleys?"

"Aw, Theo," Pansy cooed, in a dramatic fashion, "you shouldn't say that about the Weasleys. After all, they're Gryffindors just like you, and Gryffindors are supposed to have very big, welcoming hearts."

Theo cast a Silencing charm on her in response, which she removed with a flick of her wrist.

"Well, Theo's right - it is rather unnerving," agreed Blaise, settling down in the chair next to Pansy. He looked at Hermione opposite him, who seemed rather rattled after her conversation with Ginny. "Red, did she say anything out of line to you?"

Andromeda chuckled as she leaned over to refill their mugs of coffee. "It's Ginny. I think she'd know her boundaries."

"I could hex her if she did," Theo quickly offered, "hexing Weasleys has got to be my favourite pastime."

Pansy let out an inelegant snort. "Please. You lost to the Weasel once at duelling. But if the she-Weasel did say anything out of line, I'd be more than happy to set things straight for you, Red," she added, smiling warmly at Hermione, who simply shrugged.

"She didn't say anything out of line," Hermione explained, a faint smile glossing her lips in response to Pansy's words. "She just talked quite a bit about Harry and Ron, kind of like the way

Luna used to when she first stayed with us, and I felt a little overwhelmed."

Theo laughed and stole a slice of bacon from Hermione, who simply smacked the back of his hand half-heartedly but let him have it. "Hey, now you know the way Draco and I used to feel! All everyone ever talked about back at Hogwarts was the three of you. Well, mostly Potter, but everyone adored the three of you."

"Is that why Draco was such a prat?" Hermione laughed. "Because he was jealous?"

"Oh - we all were," Blaise admitted. "It's one thing to have a deadlock rivalry with Gryffindor; another thing altogether to have the other two houses support

Gryffindor at every quidditch match or every other competition."

"It was a shame, really," a sudden voice made them all whirl around in surprise, their mouths falling open as they saw Luna entering the kitchen with a breezy smile on her face. "I mean, it's not like the Slytherins could help which house they were sorted into. A lot of people thought Slytherins were bad just because all the worst people came from that house. But there're plenty of wonderful people from Slytherin too."

"Merlin, Luna!" Theo shook his head in disbelief. "Do you just apparate into any house you bloody fancy? Although, I do think your statement's valid. You're clearly one of the enlightened," he

added, with a nod of approval.

Andromeda smiled at the blonde haired witch and immediately sat her down at the table. "I have Luna come over often to give me updates about the Order."

"Yes, but this early in the morning? And didn't she just update you about the Order yesterday?" Pansy smirked at Luna. "Lovegood, if I didn't know better, I'd say you're getting rather fond of the lot of us."

"Oh, I am," Luna replied matter-of-factly, staring round the kitchen with a placid air about her. "I quite like this place. Feels like a proper home."

The others smiled at her and Andromeda laid a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You're quite welcome to stay here,

Luna," the older woman offered graciously, "I have several other rooms and I can clear out one of them for you. Perhaps the one on the second floor. I don't think Hermione's using that much." Hermione promptly blushed at the knowing look on Andromeda's face. "I do use it," she insisted weakly, amidst the chuckles of the other Slytherins. The truth was, she hardly found any use of it, because going to sleep next to Draco had become a nightly routine for her. With him, the nightmares were kept at bay. With him, she felt safe.

"Sure you do, Red," Blaise grinned.

"Sure you do."

Draco was seldom ever caught off guard, but this was definitely one of those rare few times. He stared at Ginny for five full seconds, which was sufficient time for her lips to curve in a wicked smile.

"You so are!" She all but exclaimed, and he hurriedly cast a wandless muffling charm on the living room. "I kind of guessed when Andromeda said that 'Mione had been staying with you for months - months! - and I thought I saw a glimpse of something earlier on when you two were seated in that chair, but now it's so obvious!"

"Calm yourself down before you get a fucking aneurysm," Draco retorted flatly, his frown deepening when she began to chuckle.

"I just love how you're not denying it, Malfoy." Ginny's eyes twinkled. "So? Does she know?" When Draco didn't answer, she stopped laughing and studied him intently. "You can trust me, you know?"

"I highly doubt that."

"Okay, what would you have me do to prove that I can be trusted?"

"I don't need you to do anything," Draco tossed back mildly. "I can easily Obliviate the last thirty seconds of our conversation."

"Touché. But what's really the problem,

Malfoy? If you like her - and she obviously likes you - what's to stop you from telling her?" When Draco faltered, she added delicately, "if you're worried about my brother, you shouldn't be."

Draco looked up sharply at that. "The Weasel's not in love with her?"

"No." She didn't miss the glimmer of relief in his eyes. "I mean, yes, but that was three years ago. As far as I know, they fancied each other for some years, and shared one boring lip-lock sometime during the final battle. And right after that, well," a flicker of sadness slipped onto Ginny's face for a brief moment. "You know what happened. We all thought Hermione had died. My brother spent months getting over her death and

months after that trying to forget about her. And he's dated after that too, occasionally. He'll be happy to see 'Mione, of course, but I highly doubt he'd feel anything other than relief that she's alive and well."

When Draco didn't answer, Ginny sighed and leaned forward, an unusually serious expression on her face.

"I know it's a war, Malfoy, and some things are too complicated to define at a time like this. But my brother spent seven years chasing the shadow of Hermione Granger before he finally caught up with her - and even then, only briefly. You don't want to have the same thing happen to you, trust me."

Draco thought that the Weasel was just

one minor obstacle, just something that was completely overshadowed by all the other things that scared - no, terrified - him. But Ginny had phrased things so eloquently and simply that the more he thought about it, the more her words made sense.

Swallowing back a troubled sigh, he climbed to his feet. Ginny watched him with startled eyes. "Where're you going?"

"Breakfast."

"Sweet. Bring me some pancakes."

"Get your own bloody breakfast," came Draco's scathing retort as he strode out of the living room.

Ginny shook her head and grinned, propping her feet up on the coffee table

as she picked up the book again. Three years had passed, but some things just never changed.

It turned out that Luna Lovegood did end up moving in.

Hermione was more than amused to see the blonde witch apparating back into the house later that day with several bags in tow, along with a few other fascinating objects. She helped her friend bring the bags up to the empty room while Pansy and Blaise were discussing the Marauder's Map with

Draco in his room.

Theo, who had nosied his way into the empty room, was more than appalled when Luna took out a lion hat, followed by an eagle hat. "You are not allowed to wear that," he declared, tossing both hats aside with a grimace. Hermione barely caught them and set them neatly down on the dresser. "I've seen you parade around with the lion one when Gryffindor played Slytherin at quidditch matches." Before Luna could argue, Theo had transfigured a clean towel into a hat in the shape of a snake, before enchanting it so that it'd hiss whenever one tapped their wand to it. Hermione was very impressed. It seemed that a lot of the spells Theo used were simply for

amusement's sake, but they were all incredibly fun.

"Now this," Theo said, setting the snake hat on Luna's head, "you can wear this. At all times. Never take it off."

"That's pretty neat," Luna commented, looking extremely pleased with the new hat, patting it gently with her fingertips. "Could you make a badger one for Hufflepuff house too? Then I'd have all four houses to match."

Theo sputtered, the look on his face so full of horror and disgust that Hermione began to laugh helplessly. "Huffle - for Salazar's sake, Lovegood, I might have fucking defected, but I've not entirely lost my mind!" He stormed out of the room, grumbling something about how

the nickname Loony Lovegood was entirely apt in situations such as these.

Hermione let out a soft chuckle before reaching over to pull more clothes out of Luna's bag. "Don't mind him, Luna. Theo'll probably come back with a badger hat later, I'm sure of it."

And if he wasn't, Hermione had already planned on badgering him until he did. And if that still didn't work, she knew that Draco or any of the other Slytherins would be more than happy to make Luna one. Okay, so maybe Draco would be less than happy, but Hermione had no doubt he'd do it if she asked.

Luna smiled and nodded. She continued to pack before glancing over at Hermione. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Luna."

"You seem very comfortable with Draco and the others," Luna pointed out, in her usual blunt honesty. "Do you ever think you'll be the same way around Ginny and Neville and the rest of the Order?"

Hermione paused to consider Luna's question seriously. "I do believe I will," she said at last, with an optimistic smile. "It'll just take time, I suppose. I'm a lot more comfortable with you now than I was some weeks ago, aren't I?"

"Yes, that's true." Luna pulled out five picture frames from her bag, and upon a closer inspection, Hermione realised those were painted portraits of herself, Neville, Ginny, Harry and Ron. Luna gazed at the pictures, the expression on

her face almost wistful. "Some things will never be the same again, will they?" "Just the same way Crookshanks will never be alive again," Hermione mused, a trace of sadness in her voice as she reached for one of the photo frames - the one of Harry - and hung it up on the wall.

She was just about to say something comforting to Luna when the doorbell rang. Hermione smiled briefly at Luna before hurrying down the stairs. The knock on the door didn't cease and no one else seemed to know that there was someone outside. She wasn't surprised. Andromeda was in her room with Teddy and Grus, while the Slytherins were in Draco's room on the third floor. The

sitting room where Ginny was napping in probably had a silencing charm placed on it.

"Hold on!" Hermione called, rushing across the living room and pulling the door open. "Sorry for the delay, we're -"

And then she froze.

Because standing right in front of her was none other than Harry Potter, the Boy who Lived, but better known as her best friend.

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expectopatronum
Conjures a spirit guardian.

To say that Hermione was shocked would've been a huge understatement. She wasn't just shocked. She felt like her entire body had gone rigid and she could hardly breathe. For a long time, she'd thought of what it would be like to meet Harry Potter, but nothing in her imagination was tantamount to the unexpectedness of the situation. The look of astonishment on Harry's face mirrored

hers, and his mouth was opened but he couldn't seem to find the right words to say.

So Hermione said it for him.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, still staring at her in disbelief. "I - I can't believe it's you, 'Mione."

She couldn't believe it was him either. Smiling faintly, she lifted a hand for him to shake. "Well, it's nice to see you again."

Harry's eyes widened even further. "What - I mean, what are you - "

"Your eloquence is truly astounding, Potter," said a familiar voice behind them, and Hermione visibly exhaled in

relief, falling several steps back from Harry. Draco strode towards the door with all the calmness in the world and smirked at his old-nemesis. "Do come in, Potter, while I'm still cordial. If you stand outside for a few more seconds I might just shut the door in your face."

That seemed to snap Harry to attention, and he shot Draco a brief look of annoyance before stepping into the house. He glanced round, surprise registering on his face when he saw the three other Slytherins standing behind Hermione. "Is - uh, is Ginny here?"

Hermione was just glad to find a window of opportunity to escape the room, where the air was more breathable. "Oh, right, I'll get her."

"Hermione - "

But she dashed into the sitting room before Harry could say another word, leaving him with three other hostile people who stared at him with matching looks of suspicion. Except Draco - who was just surveying him with a general air of bored amusement.

"You should learn how to shut your mouth, Potter," he drawled, moving to settle down on the sofa. "Makes you look even more unattractive than you already are."

"Three years and you're still such a prick," Harry rolled his eyes, but something about his demeanour was strange, almost as though he were entirely uncomfortable with the situation.

Draco raised his eyebrows at the half-hearted jeer. Surely, saint Potter could've come up with something better than that. "Well, you know me," he said, in his usual arrogant fashion. Something about being the presence of either Potter or the Weasel always brought that out in him. "Being a prick's how I get by."

Harry didn't respond. Draco frowned slightly and turned to look at his friends, whose matching looks of confusion all mirrored his. He was just about to clear the silence with a scathing remark - again, he couldn't help it, Potter always did bring out the asinine in him - when Ginny and Hermione reappeared by the doorway.

"Harry?" Ginny seemed overjoyed to see

him, and rushed over despite the slight wobbliness of her legs. She was a blur of red-hair and freckles as she launched herself into his arms. "I'm so glad to see you here! I didn't think you'd leave the house."

Harry seemed relieved to see her and dropped a soft kiss on her forehead. "After George told me about the rescue mission, I had to see you. Your parents may drop by awhile later."

"Fucking great," Theo deadpanned, causing Ginny to roll her eyes at him. "Is this place going to be a congregational centre for all sorts of Gryffindor reunions? I mean, if I - "

But his voice was cut off abruptly when Blaise shot a Silencing charm at him.

Harry stared at the Slytherins oddly for a moment before his gaze trailed back to Hermione, who was standing close to Draco, her fingers intertwined with his. His eyes widened, but he tactfully chose not to bring it up. "George said that 'Mione was here too," Harry said instead, mostly to Ginny. "Had to see for myself if it was true."

"You didn't know?" This question came from Pansy, who was regarding him with the usual Slytherin suspicion, but her tone was unexpectedly cordial. "Didn't anyone tell you that Red - sorry, Hermione was back?"

Harry promptly flushed. And Draco, despite his natural hatred for Potter, threw a warning glance at his three

friends. There was something incredibly different about Harry, and Draco was wondering if there was more than what met the eye. But more than anything, he wanted to know how Harry had lost Hermione three years ago.

Deciding to get to the bottom of this, he nudged Hermione softly. "Granger, stay with Parkinson for a moment," he told her, and she nodded in relief, quickly detaching herself from his side and practically rushing over to the Slytherins. Draco waved his friends away and took a bold step forward. "Potter, I need a word with you. Alone." Harry looked stunned but he quickly recovered. "Alright."

"Come on, guys," Blaise said, mindfully

removing his friends and himself from the living room. Both he and Pansy seemed reluctant to leave but Theo was more than happy to, wrapping a lazy arm around Hermione's shoulder and leading her up the stairs.

"Now Potter's in the house too," Draco heard Theo grumble and almost smirked at the annoyance in his friend's tone. "Let's get out of here. You know, to climb to the third floor and jump out the window."

They disappeared out of sight, and Draco lifted his hand to cast wandless Silencing charms on the room. Then he jerked his head briefly in the direction of the sofa, gesturing for Ginny and Harry to take a seat. They sat, and he decided

that dealing with the matter in the most blunt, honest fashion was for the best.

So he leaned forward, bracing his arms on his elbows. "Potter, there's something I've been meaning to ask you, much as I don't like the sight of your face," he couldn't help but add, and wasn't surprised to see the eye-roll that Ginny gave him.

Harry, on the other hand, was more than calm about it, which made him feel like an immature prat. "You're not a sight for sore eyes either, Malfoy, but do go on."

Draco almost smirked. He never did like Potter, but this reminded him of old times. "I want to know how you manage to lose Granger three years ago," he said flatly, ignoring the way both Harry and

Ginny stiffened. "Granger told me she doesn't remember a thing about that day, and I want to know why."

There was a silence as Harry and Ginny exchanged shocked glances. The redheaded witch was the first to speak. "She doesn't remember how she was captured?"

Draco shook his head slowly, regarding the two with suspicious intent. Were they lying, or were they not? He didn't know either of them well enough, and his fingers were positively itching to use Legilimency.

With a deep, resigned sigh, Harry glanced away before looking back at Draco again. "Three years ago, you know how I - " he visibly swallowed;

looking so distraught that Draco almost regretted asking him. Almost. " - I lost to the Dark Lord. McGonagall saw that I was about to lose, and the shield she cast on me barely kept me alive."

Draco remembered it perfectly. He hadn't been close enough to see the final showdown, but he'd seen it from the distance, hiding behind a broken pillar and hating himself for not being able to do a thing about it. He remembered seeing a giant charge into the fray to take the brunt of the killing curse, remembered McGonagall cast her shield - he'd never seen a more powerful one before. He remembered the gasps from the Order as Harry was thrown back from the force of the killing curse. He

remembered the sheer look of triumph on the Dark Lord's face as he advanced towards Harry.

"After that, Shackbolt picked me up and told me to run," Harry continued, his eyes downcast and voice unsteady. "For some reason, none of us could apparate out of there - "

"Anti-apparition wards," Draco cut in, feeling the need to explain. "Bellatrix put them there. She also used a weather charm to hide the Dementors."

"Yeah, we kind of figured. Anyway, the Order just dispersed. I found my broom and got on it. Ron was right behind me, and so was Ginny. But Hermione couldn't find her broom so I went back to the courtyard and pulled her onto mine.

We'd almost got out - we were so close, way past the towers, when a spell came out of nowhere and knocked her right off the broom."

Draco's mind was reeling. So this was how Harry Potter lost Hermione Granger. He was finally learning the truth at last. Harry wasn't lying either; which could only mean one thing:

Someone else had used Obliviate on Hermione Granger before she disappeared.

"She fell - " Harry's voice caught, and Ginny reached over to rub soothing circles on his back. " - fifty-feet from the sky, and I couldn't even catch her in time."

"We all thought she died from the fall,"

Ginny said softly, brushing an errant tear away from her eyes. "We really did. And the Death-Eaters were chasing us so we had to get out of there."

"A bunch of us searched for her afterwards. But with the death-eaters patrolling almost everywhere, there wasn't much headway we could make of it. The Order was low on resources and people and they couldn't help us, so after months, we just expected the worst."

And this was the truth. A part of Draco felt almost relieved that Hermione's friends had searched for her; he knew that she was more than distraught because she thought they hadn't, and Potter's revelation now put things in perspective.

But he was still furious with the rest of the Order for giving up on Hermione so quickly. So she fell out of the sky. So you couldn't find her. But you didn't give up because she was Hermione Granger; she was one in a million, intelligent and kind and flawed and perfect all at once, and you didn't give up on her because she was worth losing everything for.

Nevertheless, a more rational side of him knew that that alone was a hypocritical thought. Draco knew that, for the most part of his life at Hogwarts, he would've chosen the same route. Save your own skin because in a war, it was kill or be killed, and you let the dead bury the dead. There was no time to grieve or to mourn because it was a war

and you fought to survive, even if it meant losing your humanity in the process.

So Draco wisely kept his mouth shut and accepted their explanation. And when Harry asked if he could have a moment with Hermione alone, Draco reluctantly agreed. Harry soon headed upstairs, leaving him alone with Ginny, and Draco cast another round of muffling charms on the room just in case.

Then he turned to Ginny. "So what's wrong with Potter?" He asked candidly. He didn't have to elaborate for her to know what he meant. With a lengthy sigh, she shifted and tucked her feet under her. "He's just given up."

"Given up?" Draco raised an eyebrow.

"What about all those for-the-side-of-good bullshit he's always fighting for?"

"I don't know. I think there comes a time when you keep losing until you're just tired and scared, and Harry's both. Mind you - I still think he's the Chosen One and that he still has a higher chance of winning the war than Neville, but he's just scared to fight another losing battle. He's already lost so much."

Haven't we all? Draco thought scathingly.

But he bit back his words and leaned back against his chair, feeling his heart clench painfully as he pictured Hermione Granger falling fifty feet from the sky, with a silent scream lodged in her throat and a Death-Eater catching her

at the last second to whisk her away into a three-year long captivity.

"You think they've killed each other yet?"

Everyone in the room turned to look at Theo, who had voiced the question. They had all trooped upstairs after Draco had dismissed them and had sought refuge in Luna's room, helping the blonde witch unpack her things and decorate the room.

Hermione was more than adept at using Colovaria to change the colours of Luna's walls to a light pale blue, and she'd been changing the colours of the

furniture to make a matching set. She thought that decorating certainly became a lot more fun with the help of magic.

Theo, on the other hand, had been ruining Hermione's efforts by displaying his Slytherin pride and changing all the blues to different shades of green. They'd finally agreed on a mix of blues and greens in the room, much to Luna's amusement.

Blaise rolled his eyes at Theo's question. "Why would Draco kill Potter?" He asked, as he stacked Luna's books onto a shelf, arranging them neatly by alphabetical order.

"Um, because it's Potter?" Theo counted off his fingers, "and Potter's face is repulsive? And Potter's personality is

repulsive? And Potter's - "

"Theo," Hermione's reproofing voice broke him off mid-rant. She narrowed her eyes at him, tapping the pillowcase firmly with her wand. "I just changed this to blue. Did you change it back to green?"

He looked almost sheepish. "...no?"

Hermione glared at him, before tapping the pillowcase twice and murmuring a quick incantation under her breath to change it back to blue. "Seven green, seven blue, the rest stays the same. You promised, Theodore Nott."

"Alright, alright," he grumbled, collapsing down onto the carpet before shooting Hermione a quizzical look. "I thought you'd be pissing on my parade

for being an arse about Potter."

"Well, Harry's my friend," she began, rather thoughtfully, "but I know that you've never been able to get along with him. So long as you don't try to change my mind about him, I think I can live with your endless grumblings about random Gryffindors and such."

"You hear that, Theo?" Pansy shot her friend a wicked smirk. "Red thinks you're being a whiny little git. She just said it in a nicer way."

Hermione grinned at Pansy before shooting a wink at Theo.

"I have a question," said Luna, from her post on the study table. She was rearranging her jewellery, most of which were odd-looking, excessively colourful

pieces. "Why is it Draco killing Harry? Why wouldn't it be the other way round?"

All three Slytherins stared at her with matching appalled expressions. "Um, because it's Draco," said Theo, as if that were a sufficient explanation on its own. "I don't understand."

"No, I mean it - it's Draco," Theo dragged out his friend's name with a sardonic look on his face. "You don't get to kill Draco because he wouldn't let you."

Blaise chuckled at the look of confusion on Luna's face. "What Theo's trying to say is, Draco's trained to become some sort of superior Death-Eater over the past three years. He was trained by

Snape - when Snape was still alive - and his aunt Bellatrix, who's a top-notch duellist. He defends just as well as he attacks. I've even seen him protect the Dark Lord on battlefields."

Luna frowned. "Why would Draco protect You-Know-Who?" She asked, curiously. "The war would end if You-Know-Who got killed on the battlefield." "Because You-Know-Who can't be killed either," Hermione explained, before anyone else could. "Trelawney's prophecy about the Chosen One means that only one particular person - Harry or Neville - gets to kill him. A lot of people have tried to kill him over the past three years. It's never worked, not even when a rogue Death-Eater slipped

him some poison once."

Her words were met with a surprised silence and she flushed when she noticed the three Slytherins staring at her. "What?" Her eyebrows knit together and she bit her lip defensively. "Draco told me."

"Yeah, well, he never told me," Pansy said slyly, "or any of us."

Theo and Blaise nodded in agreement, all gleaming eyes and teasing smiles that Hermione couldn't help but respond to with a shy grin of her own. But before she could say anything else, a sudden movement by the doorway made her look up, her eyes widening when she saw who it was.

"Oh, hello, Harry."

The shift in the atmosphere was almost palpable, the three Slytherins looked uncomfortable and only Luna smiled brightly at Harry, her calm demeanour completely unperturbed.

Harry fidgeted awkwardly before giving a quick nod of acknowledgement to Luna. But his attention was focused on Hermione. "Hey. I was wondering if I could speak to you in private for a moment."

"Of course." Hermione pushed herself off Luna's bed, heading towards Harry with a smile that was more confident than she felt. "Let's go into Theo's room."

"No!" Theo sounded so horrified that Hermione badly wanted to laugh. Even

Harry's lips were twitching in amusement as they headed out of the room. "Red, don't you fucking dare bring - ow!"

He was cut off with a loud thumping sound, and Hermione presumed it meant that either Blaise or Pansy had put him in place. A moment later, Pansy stuck her head out to smile at them cheerily. "You can use ours. Blaise and I won't mind."

"Thanks, Pansy." Hermione smiled at her friend and led Harry into the correct room, closing the door firmly behind them. "Sorry about Theo," she said, sitting on the bed with her legs crossed. Harry sat opposite her, maintaining a fair distance between them, which she was grateful for. "He's nice once you get to

know him."

"I doubt it," Harry chuckled softly, but his laughter soon trailed off as an awkward silence descended upon them.

"Listen, Hermione, I know it's been awhile and I just - I wanted to do some catching up. I've missed you, honestly."

"I've missed you too," Hermione said truthfully, her lips curving into a faint smile at him. "Well - I miss what I can remember of you, at least. I've forgotten a lot since then, but I really didn't mean to."

"No, it's fine, I understand," Harry quickly assured her. "George filled me in. And I know it'll take awhile for us to get back on our old footing, but I'm willing to try. No matter how long it

takes."

Relief rushed through Hermione and her smile widened. She understood now how Harry Potter had been such an important part of her life. It didn't take long for her to feel comfortable around him and she automatically knew that he was someone she could trust.

"Yes, of course," she readily replied.

"What would you like to know?"

"Well, what happened during the past three years?" The expression on her face didn't escape Harry's notice, and he hastily backpedalled. "It's fine, you don't have to tell me. We can talk about something else."

"No," Hermione quickly said. "I do want to tell you, it's just - " she took a deep

breath, reaching up to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear. " - you know how some things are just so difficult to say? This is one of them. I want to tell you, but I just can't seem to find the right words to say."

Except Draco, she suddenly thought. Except Draco, he's the only one I'm comfortable telling everything to. With Draco, everything seemed easy to say, because he'd been such a big part of the war that she knew he'd understand better than anyone else.

Well, if she couldn't say it out loud, there were always other methods.

"I'll show you," she said instead. She climbed off the bed and gestured for Harry to follow her, smiling at the

confused look on his face. "Do you know how to use a Pensieve?"

Draco didn't hesitate to find Hermione once Harry had left. He found her seated on the ledge beside the Pensieve, a trace of sadness in her eyes as she studied a familiar-looking phial. Draco took one look at it and realised it was the one that held all of Hermione's memories of her time in captivity, the same one that Pansy had made when she first met the girl.

"Granger," he shut the door behind him, casting wordless Silencing charms on the room.

Hermione looked up immediately, relief

flickering on her face as she climbed to her feet. She crossed the room quickly, burying her face in his chest and wrapping her arms around him tightly. "Has he left?"

Draco knew exactly who she meant. Potter had all but rushed down the stairs several minutes ago, his face pale and distraught. He hadn't even noticed Luna or the rest of the Slytherins chatting away in the living room, or the fact that his girlfriend was laughing along with them. He'd simply hurried out of the house as though in a trance.

Ginny had immediately gone after him, but Draco thought that the brunette witch in the inventory might have had something to do with Potter's mood. He

wasn't wrong. Hermione seemed a little shaken, but far calmer than Potter had been.

"Yes," Draco said simply in response to her question. He shut his eyes briefly as her fingers traced the planes on his back lightly before she pulled away fractionally, still keeping her arms wound tightly around him.

Then she was looking up at him, the same flicker of sadness crossing her face again. "Do you think he left because I upset him?"

Draco blinked at the unexpectedness of her question. "Didn't Potter want to know what happened?"

"Well, yes - but," Hermione let out a lengthy sigh. "It's happened so many

times, Draco. Every time someone learns about what happened to me, they just pull back. They leave the room - or the house - only to come back sometime later looking at me with nothing but pity in their eyes. It happened with Pansy, and Blaise, and Theo, and now Harry. I don't resent them for it, honestly, I don't. It's just that I wish they wouldn't feel sorry for me. I mean - I survived, didn't I?"

"Granger - " Draco shut his eyes briefly, trying to grapple the thoughts in his head. Swallowing hard, he opened his eyes and tightened his grip around her. "Believe me when I say that I spent three years looking for you, and you spent so many nights telling me what happened to

you - but I've never, not once, felt anything remotely like pity for you. I've spent three years surviving a bloody war and I've met countless of people and heard countless of backstories and seen countless of memories - but you're braver and stronger than anyone I've ever met."

Hermione was silent, her eyes downcast for such a long time that he began to wonder if he'd said something wrong. And when she looked up at him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears, he began to panic.

"Granger - " he pulled away warily, holding her at arm's length. "I didn't mean to - "

"You didn't upset me, you beautiful

idiot," she laughed weakly, burrowing her face against his chest again and sniffing slightly. "What you said meant a lot to me, Draco, thank you."

"If you're really grateful you'd Scourgify my shirt when you're done snivelling into it."

She laughed even harder, but still clung close. And, after a moment, he relented and tightened his grip around her, memorising how it felt like to have Hermione Granger in his arms.

Hermione was getting better at Patronus Charms. She didn't know for sure, but she could practically feel the magic

coursing through her veins and into the wand each time she cast the spell. It was stronger each time, sending a surge of adrenaline through her.

During one of her lessons with Blaise, curiosity got the better of her and she asked him how he managed to cast a Patronus when the rest of the Death-Eaters couldn't. And when she learnt that he'd been a rogue Death-Eater all along, things suddenly made sense.

"So you intended to betray You-Know-Who from the very beginning," Hermione clarified, pausing in the middle of her spell to stare at Blaise in surprise.

He nodded with satisfaction. "I thought about fighting on the Order's side, but

back then, the Order was completely run to the ground by the Dark Lord's army. So I figured that if I became a Death-Eater, there'd be a way for me to become an informant for the Order."

Hermione felt rather awed as she looked at him. "That was an incredibly brave thing to do."

"Brave - and stupid," he added, with a sheepish chuckle. "Within three days of my initiation - Draco found out my plans and he cornered me and told me to abandon them altogether."

"Because he used Legilimency?"

"He used Legilimency on a lot of people back then," Blaise grinned. And Hermione couldn't help but wonder why Draco never used Legilimency on her.

"Anyway, we started 17-65 after that," Blaise continued, a nostalgic smile curving his face as he thought about the past. "Draco discussed with me the possibility of destroying the Dark Lord's army in a more discreet, covert way, and I was all for it. Then he got Pansy and Theo to help. We all had different reasons to do it - I wanted to end the war, Theo and Pansy owed Draco their lives in some way or other. And Draco -"

" - wanted redemption," Hermione finished, with a smile.

"Really, it's fascinating how well you know - oh, hey, Draco!" Blaise smirked when Draco sauntered over at that moment and Hermione promptly flushed

red. Draco didn't seem to notice, and he paused a short distance away from them, raising his eyebrows curiously.

"Patronus charm?"

"Yeah," Blaise pulled Hermione to her feet, showing her the motions for the spell again. "You've almost got the hang of it, Red. Just clear your mind and focus."

Hermione shot a hesitant glance at Draco, who was watching them calmly. "There's a lot of pressure," she murmured, because to have him staring at her while she thought about him was unnerving, to say the least.

"Come on, Granger, I thought you thrived well under pressure," Draco said, almost smugly, sounding very distinctly

like he did back during Hogwarts days.
"Now impress me."

"I don't have to impress you of all people, Malfoy," she shot back, but the challenging glint in his eyes made her determined to try again. Taking a deep breath, she concentrated hard on the happiest thought she could possibly think of - him.

"Expecto Patronum."

The magic surged stronger this time, and she wasn't surprised to see a startling white glow leave the wand. But this time, instead of taking the shape of a usual flimsy shield, the blinding light morphed into a something completely unexpected.

Hermione was so stunned that she could

hardly speak. She'd finally managed a corporeal Patronus, and her mind was reeling with aftermath of her shock. The moment she lost focus, the charm vanished in a burst of white vapour.

"That's interesting," said another voice behind them. Luna had clearly passed by in time to see Hermione cast her Patronus, and she looked both impressed and intrigued. "'Hermione's Patronus used to be an otter. It was never a dragon."

And Hermione promptly felt her heart stop beating.

Physically impossible, she knew that, of course - but it sure as hell felt like it. Her eyes immediately flickered towards Draco, who was staring back at her, his

features rearranged in an expression of unfiltered surprise. He looked so taken aback that he could hardly say a word.

"Well," Blaise ventured, sounding distinctly amused now, "Patronus changes are often rare but not impossible - happens after traumatic incidents or even when you're in love. I think of Pansy when I cast mine, so it's no surprise that my Patronus takes the shape of a wolf. Fascinating, isn't it?" He grinned before taking a step back, winking as Hermione shot him a look of horror. "Luna, I think 'Dromeda's calling us in."

"Oh, alright. I don't think she is but I think these two would like to be alone now," Luna said serenely, quickly

heading back into the house.

Blaise laughed heartily and strode in after her, pausing on the way to pat Draco on the back. Hermione could still hear his laughter long after he'd disappeared into the house and she thought that if there were one person she wouldn't mind hexing at that moment, it'd be that bloody tosser Blaise Zabini.

The silence that was left in the wake of Blaise's and Luna's departure was frightening, to say the least. It felt like she was tethering off the edge of a slippery precipice. And when Draco took a step closer, she hardly dared to look at him.

"Is it true?" Draco said at last, his voice unusually low and rough. He sounded

even more hesitant than she was. "What Blaise said - is it true?"

Hermione finally chanced a glance at him, realising that his expressions were locked down once again, tightened and completely unreadable. She swallowed hard, not trusting herself to speak at the moment, and simply nodded. Once.

But that was confirmation enough for him and he took another step closer, his figure blocking the sun from her direct line of vision. "Hermione," he clenched his jaw briefly, and she could literally see him working his way through the words and emotions that threatened to engulf him whole. "I'm not a good person - "

"I know."

" - or even a decent person - "

"I know."

" - and I will never deserve you - "

"I know," she reached down to grasp his hand, pressing his palm against her cheek and tilting her face up to look directly at him. "I don't like you because of who you are, Draco. I like you in spite of who you are."

She watched as something indecipherable flickered in his silver eyes. And then he was bringing his other hand up to brush against her cheek, closing the distance between them with one final, decisive step. His breath was warm on her face and she found her eyes fluttering shut as he leaned closer.

"Hermione," he breathed, and then

stopped. "One second."

She opened her eyes in confusion as he pulled back briefly, casting an annoyed glance in the direction of the house. She could've sworn she saw Andromeda, Luna and all the Slytherins peeking out through one of the windows; but before she knew it, Draco had lifted a hand to cast a charm on the house. Immediately, all the drapes on the different windows were pulled shut, leaving them out of sight from any prying eyes.

A bubble of amused laughter escaped her lips as she turned back to him, watching as his features softened, his lips shifting into a crooked, hesitant smile. Draco hardly ever smiled. She had to catch her breath at the sight of

that.

"Not because," he repeated, seeking affirmation through his gaze alone, his fingers tightening on her hips, "but in spite of?"

Merlin, he was just as frightened as she was, wasn't he? Or perhaps even more so. Hermione nodded, letting a light smile gloss her lips. "In spite of."

The expression on his face shifted, his silver eyes darkened to grey as he leaned in, slowly capturing her lips with his. He didn't let her hold back or hide away - it was just him and her. Just his lips, gentle but demanding on hers; just his fingers threading through her curls, his other hand tilting her head to that perfect angle, his thumb brushing the

flush on her cheek; just a hint of his tongue skimming deliciously across the crevice between her lips and wrenching a breathless sound from her. And somewhere in the back of her beautifully addled brain, Hermione Granger could only think of one thing -

Draco Malfoy kissed like there was no tomorrow.

And in a war, that was the best way to kiss.

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3 6

m o r s m o r d r e

Conjures the dark mark.

The first thing Draco and Hermione noticed upon returning to the house was that everyone was seated in the living room.

The second thing was that Andromeda looked thoroughly happy for them. Hermione quickly detached herself from Draco's side, and he watched, unable to

take his eyes off her as she hugged Andromeda, exchanging an enthusiastic, discreet conversation with his aunt.

A dry, exaggerated cough ripped Draco's attention away and he looked at Theo, who was balanced on the arm of the chair that Luna was seated on. Blaise and Pansy were on the sofa, gazing up expectantly at him.

"I'll hex anyone who hugs me," Draco warned, half-afraid that they'd give him the same reaction that Andromeda had given Hermione, but none of them budged an inch.

Instead, Blaise's lips simply curled in a smirk. "Just tell us one thing - who made the first move?"

The hesitant pause on Draco's part was

answer enough.

And Blaise's grin vanished the next instant. "No way!"

On the other hand, Pansy looked more than ecstatic. She let out a whoop, punching her boyfriend playfully on his arm before waggling her fingers at him. "I knew it! Come on, boys, pay the ladies!"

Grumbling under his breath, Blaise dug into his pockets for a couple of galleons and shoved them into Pansy's hands. Theo swore and did the same to Luna, complaining under his breath the whole time.

Draco's eyes narrowed as realisation suddenly dawned on him. "You fucking bet on us?"

"Oh, lighten up, Draco," Pansy rolled her eyes. "Luna and I just bet that Hermione would be the first one to confess her feelings for you, that's all. The guys were foolish enough to place their bets on you."

"My mistake," Theo grumbled, still looking disgruntled at having lost the bet. "I can't believe Draco didn't confess first!" He added, blatantly disregarding the fact that his friend was still standing in the room and glaring daggers at him.

"Well, Hermione's always been very honest about her feelings," said Luna, who looked extremely pleased by the turn of events.

Whereupon the four launched into a heated debate about who the braver was

of the two, and it was all Draco could do to keep from hexing them left right and centre. Honestly, of all the bloody things in the world they could bet about, it had to be this.

And the worst part about it was that he wasn't even surprised. Slytherins were known for doing things like these anyway.

Sometime later that night, Draco was heading up the stairs when he paused on the landing of the second floor as he heard a rather animated conversation going on in one of the rooms. And the moment he heard the words 'shag-tastic'

and 'accio condom' said in quick succession in Theo's distinct voice, he knew that this was a conversation he had to end.

Effective immediately.

He strode quickly to Theo's room, pushing open the door. His eyes landed on Hermione, and one look at her flushed face told him that this was not a conversation she should be participating in.

He glared at Pansy, Blaise and Theo, each of them staring back at him innocently. "Kindly explain to me why you three feel the pressing need to corrupt my girlfriend," he said flatly, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the doorframe.

Pansy gave him a wicked smile. "I don't think that's the true pressing need here, if you know what I mean."

The look he shot her was enough to kill the Dark Lord himself, but Pansy being Pansy didn't turn a hair. "There is no pressing need."

"Can't get it up, mate?" Blaise chuckled. "Magic helps, sometimes. Remember what you said to Theo about the Levitation charm?"

Theo sniggered, lifting a hand to draw the motions in mid-air. "Swish and flick."

"It's Le-vi-O-sa," Hermione added breezily. "Not Le-vi-o-SAR."

Draco couldn't quite get a grasp on the situation. Somehow, all the three

Slytherins were mocking him - as if he ever had to worry about not being able to get a bloody erection! - and Hermione was more than happy to join in.

Before any more damage could be done, Draco hastily extricated Hermione from the room. They headed up to the stairs, and it wasn't until they were safely in their shared bedroom, with the magic locks and muffling charms in place when Draco glanced down at her and realised that she was still grinning.

Still fucking grinning.

And even though he was crazy about her, Draco also knew that letting Hermione Granger have the upper-hand in a situation - in any situation, really - was a very dangerous thing. So he levelled her

a look with a gleam in his eye that far outshone Pansy's in wickedness.

"Granger," he drawled, with all the calmness in the world, "if you grin for one second longer, I'll be inclined to take off my pants just to prove to you how bloody wrong you are."

That promptly wiped the smile off her face.

"It was just a joke," she mumbled, crossing her arms defensively over her chest, cheeks darkening several shades of red as she glanced away. "I should think I have a fair grasp of how well your anatomy works, considering the fact that we sleep on the same bed."

If he were saint Potter or someone else with a little more propriety, he would've

been embarrassed. Unfortunately, Draco was a Malfoy and Malfoys had no shame. He simply let his lips curl up in a smug grin, bracing both arms against the wall to cage her in. "Turns you on, doesn't it, Granger?"

"You're a bloody cockroach, Malfoy," she returned, even though she a delicious shudder wrecked through her when he leaned in to brush his lips against her forehead.

She was an addictive mix of flushed embarrassment and snarky defiance all at once, and he didn't think he could ever get enough of her. "You're forgetting all your adjectives," he reminded her, "foul, loathsome, evil and little...any of those ring a bell?"

Her eyes met his curiously; a strange, satisfied smile curving her lips as she reached up to slide her palms up the planes of his cheeks. "You remember?"

And if he couldn't say a word earlier on, when she'd confessed her feelings for him, he found it easier this time round; in the safety of their room, with her hands drawing him close and everything else faded to black until he could see nothing but her, the sole source of light in his otherwise destroyed life.

"Can't forget. You're in here," he mumbled, pulling her hand up to his head, feeling her fingers sift gently through his blond locks; "and in here," he pulled her other hand up to press against his chest, her palm warm over

his heart. "Even Obliviate couldn't make me forget you."

The next morning, they were standing side by side in front of the sink brushing their teeth when Hermione revealed the juicy details of the conversation she had with the Slytherins the night before.

"I'm not the most sexually experienced person," she mumbled around a mouthful of toothpaste. "Pansy thought that I might like some advice. Who knew that Blaise and Theo'd be more than happy to give their so-called valuable input?"

He stepped aside for her and she spat into the sink, cleansing her mouth with

water the muggle way. Draco, on the other hand, didn't hesitate to use his wand to clear out all remnant traces of toothpaste from his mouth.

"Blaise and Theo were more than happy to tell me about your shag-fests," Hermione added wickedly, laughing when Draco began to choke. She picked up her wand, pointed it at his throat. "Anapneo."

His airway cleared instantly and he shot her a grateful look. After he'd finished cleansing his mouth, he narrowed his eyes. "What did they say?"

"That all the rumours I heard back at Hogwarts were true. And more."

Draco let out a groan, closing the gap between them to press his forehead

against hers, his lips ghosting hers with the barest friction that made her let out a whimper. "Not for a long time," he mumbled against her lips, his eyes closed like he feared nothing but judgement and loathing if he met her gaze. "After 'Dromeda told me to find you, I just focused on that and nothing else seemed to matter. And the longer I worked for the Dark Lord and the more I...killed - it just didn't seem right."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked quietly.

"I mean that - the blood stains," he swallowed hard, eyes still shut. "They don't fade. There are times when I look down at my hands and I think they're crimson, red. No amount of magic or

scrubbing seems to erase that. For the longest time, it seemed wrong to touch anyone. Then you came along and, fuck, Granger," he opened his eyes, the silver almost obsidian, and pulled back. "My defences crumble in front of you. But there are times when I am terrified that I'd somehow - I don't know - ruin you, taint you, or something."

Hermione simply wound her arms tightly around him and let his words sink into the soft silence. She thought of all the times back in the apartment when Draco had pulled away from her, or kept his distance from her. His actions now made perfect sense.

"That's what you're afraid of?"

He nodded silently. She pulled back,

gripping his face gently and pressing her lips quickly to his before drawing away. She hoped that each touch, each kiss was an affirmation that all the monsters were just in his head and in the past.

"You know what I was afraid of?" She let an embarrassed smile gloss her face as she tried to lighten the mood. "How I'd keep up with your apparent sexual prowess."

Draco's lips immediately twitched, his dark mood rapidly vanishing. "What?"

"Well, I've got a lot of catching up to do," she shrugged, trying and failing to fight the blush that was already spreading across her cheeks rapidly.

"There was Victor Krum - very sloppy kisser, I vaguely remember," she counted

off on one finger, "and Ron - Luna tells me we kissed - once. That's two. End of."

He stared at her in amusement. "Granger, you know that doesn't bother me."

"Of course I know it doesn't." She picked up her wand, slipping her hand through his as they headed down the steps together. "But I like being top of the class, best at anything I do."

"Even in this?"

The smirk she shot him was more wicked than any he could possibly manage. "Especially in this."

He paused abruptly on the steps leading towards the first floor and turned towards her, a glimmer of challenge in his smile. "Well, Granger, I think this'll

work in both our favours. You know that I'll award you 'Exceeds Expectations' no matter what the result," he added with a breathy whisper, his breath hot on her lips.

Hermione laughed and looped her arms around his neck. "With a certificate and everything?"

"I'll have it framed and hung on 'Dromeda's wall."

"No, you would not!" Andromeda's appalled voice interrupted them, and the two of them whirled around, only to find the older woman heading up the stairs. She paused briefly to wave her finger warningly at Draco. "No frames on my walls. I will not allow Teddy to grow up in a house with certificates that read -

Exceeds Expectations in Oral Examination - in bold black font on my wall!"

"Sweet Merlin," Hermione promptly flushed, burying her face in her hands, thoroughly mortified that Andromeda had clearly heard everything.

"Dromeda!"

But Draco simply let out a throaty chuckle, tugging Hermione close to him as shifted aside for Andromeda.

"Slytherins don't mince words, Granger - might as well get used to it."

Andromeda laughed in agreement and headed upstairs. "By the way," she tossed nonchalantly over her shoulder, "you have company in the kitchen."

"What company?" Hermione inquired,

but Andromeda had conveniently disappeared by then.

She followed Draco down the stairs, pausing in surprise when she saw the people in the kitchen. Luna was in the kitchen whipping up a batch of pancakes, but that wasn't the unexpected sight.

Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter were seated at the kitchen table having breakfast.

"For Salazar's sake," Draco swore, making everyone in the kitchen look up.

"Do all my sworn enemies live here?"

"Not Ron," Ginny was the first to break the silence, a mocking smirk on her face.

"Yet."

"Don't put ideas into saint Potter's head, Weaselette; we all know that he and the

bloody Weasel are attached at the hip."

"Morning to you too, Malfoy," Harry greeted calmly, hardly fazed by Draco's snub, his smile widening at the brunette hovering uncertainly by the doorway.

"Hi, Hermione."

Hermione waved shyly at him. "Hello, Harry. Ginny. Morning, Luna."

"Morning. Would you and Draco like some pancakes?" Luna smiled serenely at them from her position in front of the stove.

Draco threw her a frosty look before returning his attention to Harry and Ginny. "I'm giving the both of you three seconds to explain why you felt the need to ruin my morning with your aggravating presence."

"I thought I told you," Ginny said blandly, spearing a bit of pancake on her fork and shoving it into her mouth, chewing slowly like she had all the time in the world. "I'm going to join your team."

"And," Harry cleared his throat almost awkwardly, "if it's alright with you, Malfoy - I'd like to join as well."

Hermione's mouth fell open in surprise, but even Draco, who had long ago since mastered the art of expressionless façades, couldn't quite stop the flicker of disbelief that flashed in his eyes for a brief moment. He narrowed his eyes at them. "What?"

Ginny shrugged. "I thought you guys were looking for people to recruit."

Harry and I would be more than happy to help."

"When the hell did we - " Draco paused abruptly as he suddenly recalled how Andromeda, Blaise and Pansy had gone to headquarters to recruit people some time ago, after 17-65 had received the mission from McGonagall. Damn it. He swallowed back the aggravated noise that was on the tip of his tongue and levelled them a challenging look. "Why would you want to join the five of us?"

"Five?" Harry blinked in confusion. "I thought Luna was a part of the team. She's the one who said that you'd be more than happy to have us."

Draco glared daggers at the blonde-haired witch, whose face remained

blank, eyes wide and innocent. "Since when were you a part of the team, Lovegood?"

"Since I moved in," Luna returned cheerfully. "Remember?"

"I thought you moved in because Andromeda invited you to stay here," Hermione interjected, looking rather confused herself as she tried to come to grips with the situation. She was more than surprised to find that her friends would much rather join the Slytherins than the Order.

"Yes, and I thought you guys were okay with it because I was a part of the team for two missions."

Draco swore under his breath again, much to the amusement of the others at

the table. "Fine. But you two," he directed his suspicious gaze at Harry and Ginny. "Why?"

"Because of Hermione," was Harry's unexpected explanation. He met her gaze, his features softening into something like unspoken apology before he turned back to Draco. "I couldn't end the war three years ago, and she paid the price for that. Ginny and I - we just want to be here for Hermione. And I want to finish what I couldn't three years ago, even if it means helping someone else defeat You-Know-Who."

Hermione felt her eyes sting with a strong wave of emotions and she smiled at Harry, reaching across the table to take his hand. "Thank you. For the

record, I still do think that you're the Chosen One. Draco thinks so too."

Everyone turned to look at Draco, who deliberately ignored them and grabbed the coffee pot, filling two mugs to the brim for himself and Hermione. It was true - he did think that Potter was far more capable of killing the Dark Lord than that git Longbottom, but he'd much rather hex his limbs off than admit that out loud.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry squeezed her hand briefly before letting go. "Well, Malfoy? Can we join? I'm kind of putting my pride on the line here."

Draco paused, setting the mugs down and glancing at Hermione. He flicked his eyes to the living room briefly, and she

immediately understood. "Excuse us, for just a few minutes," she murmured, climbing to her feet and heading out to the living room with him.

Once they were out of earshot, Draco quickly cast muffling charms, leaned against the back of the sofa and let out a lengthy sigh. "I know they're your friends, Granger, but - " he trailed off, looking rather reluctant to finish his sentence.

"You're uncomfortable with them," she smiled, leaning into him and looping her arms around his neck. "So am I, to be honest. I do love them, but it's just a lot to take in all at once. And I do miss the times when it was just the five of us against the world."

His lips curved in a fleeting, satisfied smile that made her heart stutter. He reached forward, his fingers twisting around a single lock of her hair and he seemed completely entranced just watching the brown strands curl and uncurl around his fingers. "I think," he started slowly, his attention still focused on her hair, "that logically speaking - it would be the wisest choice to include more people, so long as they're people we can trust."

"I have no doubt that Ginny and Harry are all trustworthy. But it's your call, Draco, you're the head of 17-65."

He shook his head. "I just started the group - but 17-65 belongs to all of us. I think the other three might want to have a

say in this."

Hermione nodded eagerly and slid her hands down to his shoulders, tugging him up so that he was no longer leaning against the sofa. "Let's go talk to them."

"No," he sounded amused, "I'll talk to them. You need to explain your behaviour to Potter and Company because now they've seen you mauling me in the middle of the living room."

Her eyes widened and she flushed when she saw that both Harry and Ginny were all sneaking surreptitious glances their way from the kitchen. "I wasn't mauling you," she argued, but still kept her hands linked around his neck, much to his never-ending amusement.

"Granger, look at Potter - he's about to

have a heart attack. On second thoughts, come here and kiss me - maybe I'll be the one who gets to kill the Boy Who fucking Lived."

Hermione rolled her eyes but she couldn't stop the laugh that spilled from her lips. "Talk to Blaise and the others," she urged, shaking her head fondly at Draco before heading back to the kitchen. She settled down opposite Harry, biting the nail on her thumb almost nervously as she met his wide green-eyed gaze. "I, um, suppose you have questions?"

"Oh, no, not questions," Ginny interjected, winking at her swiftly. She didn't seem surprised at all, and Hermione had to wonder if perhaps

Ginny had guessed it all this while. "Harry's just having a bout of hysterical screaming ringing inside his head and trying to decide whether to claw his own eyes out or hex Malfoy's balls off."

Hermione laughed when Harry shot his girlfriend a flat look. "I'm just taken aback, that's all," Harry mumbled, almost defensively, before turning back to Hermione. "When did this happen? I don't recall you and Malfoy being together last time I visited."

"It happened just yesterday," Luna explained on Hermione's behalf, a pleased expression on her face. "And I won two galleons from Theo because Hermione made the first move."

Hermione stared at the blonde witch in

surprise. "Is that why Theo couldn't stop grumbling?"

"Yes, I don't think he fancies losing a bet to a Ravenclaw."

"Malfoy didn't make the first move?"

Ginny shook her head, her eyes glinting in good humour. "Shame. And there I was thinking he'd be the first to break, especially after I'd wheedled the truth out of him the other day."

Harry blinked at Ginny. "Wait. You knew about Malfoy and Hermione?"

"Saw it the morning after I spent the night at Andromeda's. Draco was so bloody obvious about it. I even asked him about it; he didn't deny anything."

Harry frowned. "And you didn't tell me?"

"Not my secret to tell."

"Since when did you become so loyal to Malfoy, of all people?"

"Since he saved my life, Harry. I owe him, even though he's a bloody prat," she mused, before turning to Hermione, who had settled down in the chair opposite her and next to Luna. "No offence, Hermione."

"None taken. Besides, he is kind of a prat," Hermione couldn't help but add, with a laugh.

Harry grinned, looking almost relieved. "Well, as long as you know it."

"Okay, is it just me, or is this situation

entirely awkward?"

Draco rolled his eyes at Theo's rhetorical question. But, as he gazed around at the group gathered in the living room, he couldn't help but secretly agree. It was awkward.

It turned out that Blaise was more than enthusiastic about having Luna, Harry and Ginny join 17-65. Pansy, naturally, was on board with his decision. And so that left Theo - who, after many hours of grumbling, finally gave in, mostly because he was outvoted two-to-one.

So 17-65 had expanded to include three more people, bringing the total count to eight. After McGonagall had dropped off a new mission several days later, Draco had quickly come up with a plan within

a few hours, and had gathered the other seven in Andromeda's living room to run his ideas by them.

"Why would it be awkward?" Ginny said now, raising her eyebrows challengingly at Theo. She was on the loveseat next to Potter, while Luna sat adjacent to them on the sofa, followed by Pansy and Blaise. Hermione, on the other hand, had opted to sit on the counter next to Theo, who was still smarting over being outvoted several afternoons ago.

"It's not awkward," Blaise hurriedly said, before Theo could voice his opinions. "Go on, Draco. What's the new mission from McGonagall about?"

Draco glanced down at the crumpled

slip of paper in his hand, looking at McGonagall's neat cursive, in spite of the fact that it had probably been written in haste. "The Order's recently tracked down one of the Dark Lord's bases. The Ruins, in the Forest of Dean?" He directed the question to Blaise in particular; who, like him, was well-versed in the different places the Dark Lord used as hideouts.

Blaise nodded but it was Harry who spoke, leaning forward in his seat, his eyes wide and curious. "The Forest of Dean?" He repeated, darting a glance over at Hermione, who smiled at him. "That's where Hermione and I stayed while we hunted for Horcruxes."

Harry was simply reminiscing, but

Hermione clearly couldn't remember a thing about it, because panic flashed in her eyes as she met Draco's gaze across the room. Draco subtly shook his head at Harry, who seemed to understand the implications of his words as well as Hermione's condition, and hastily kept his mouth shut.

"So, The Ruins," Draco repeated, carefully steering the conversation back on track. "Shacklebolt thinks it's impossible to break into the base, because the place is on full lockdown."

"Oh, right." Realisation dawned in Blaise's eyes as he shifted in his seat to explain to the rest. "It's charmed such that you can't apparate in or disapparate out. Portkeys don't work either. You have

to fly in, but if you're not a Death-Eater, you'll immediately trigger off an alarm that'll alert the entire of the Dark Lord's army."

"Well, this is tricky," Pansy frowned. "How will we retrieve the plans and escape without triggering the alarm?"

"You can't." Draco shrugged when his words were met with worried looks. "There's no way to do it - trust me, I was there when Bellatrix did the charms on the place. So you have about five minutes to get in, get the plans and get the hell out of there before you get yourselves killed."

He'd said it so nonchalantly that Blaise narrowed his eyes, staring suspiciously at the blonde wizard. "You'd better have

a bloody backup plan, Draco, because this one has failed-mission written all over it. How the hell are we supposed to do all that in five minutes?"

Draco smirked now, his fingers instinctively reaching up to graze the Dark Mark on his arm that was hidden under his jumper. "You all have five minutes. I have far more than that."

"Draco? Are you awake?"

Draco let out a muffled groan against her shoulder and shifted. While he knew very well that this was one of Hermione's favourite habits - talking in the middle of the night about arbitrary

things - he actually was about to sink into a deep, undisturbed slumber this time round. He'd long ago since realised that sleeping next to Hermione Granger was possibly the only antidote to his lengthy bouts of insomnia. He loved having her next to him, even though he'd never say that aloud.

"No," he mumbled now, keeping his eyes shut when she shifted in his arms to face him, her breath warm on his face. "Go back to sleep, Granger."

"Can't. It's hot and I'm taking my top off." Draco had both his eyes open before he could even realise that Hermione was just teasing. She was staring up at him with twinkling brown eyes and was still very, very much clothed in his shirt. Her

smile stretched when she saw that he'd well and truly fallen into his trap.

"Fucking tease," he muttered, shifting so that he was on his back, running a tired hand through his hair. But when he heard her laugh, his lips couldn't help but twitch reluctantly in response. "What do you want?"

"Earlier on, at the meeting, when you were telling us about McGonagall's mission," she began, slowly, almost thoughtfully. "You said that you'd have a longer time to break in compared to us, but you didn't explain why."

"I didn't?" He repeated, even though he knew full well what he hadn't said.

"No. All you said was that you'd have more than five minutes. And then you

went ahead and assigned us our tasks."

Draco let out a lengthy sigh and turned back to face her, his face a hairsbreadth away from hers. "I didn't elaborate any further earlier because I didn't want anyone to worry. Least of all you, Granger."

He was surprised when she leaned in, brushing her lips briefly against his and sending a pleasant ache knotting in his lower stomach.

"It has to do with your Dark Mark, doesn't it?" She caught the flicker of shock in his eyes and chuckled. "Draco, it's closing in to summer and you're still wearing your jumpers and jackets everywhere you go. Don't think I haven't noticed. Theo and the others have

stopped wearing long-sleeved clothes to cover their Dark Marks up a long time ago because they know it doesn't bother me anymore. But you still cover it up all the time."

Draco briefly thought about his days at Hogwarts, and how Lucius, his father, had always been furious whenever he learnt that Hermione Granger's grades were leaps and bounds ahead of Draco's, even though he'd always come in second only to her. Earning Lucius's approval had always been an uphill task, and Draco had spent most of his early teenage years loathing the bushy-haired witch because she made him pale in comparison. Always made him feel so inadequate.

But for the past few months, Draco had begun to see that Hermione's title as the brightest witch of their age was well-deserved. And this astute deduction about his Dark Mark had once again proved her worthy of that title.

Feeling a strange rush of affection for her, Draco reached up to curl a gentle hand around the nape of her neck, pulling her in close. "You. Are. Brilliant," he mumbled, punctuating each word with a hot, searing kiss. Her lips parted; he could see the heat in her irises and her silent pleas for him to deepen his kisses and not hold back.

Truthfully, he wanted to. Merlin, he really wanted to, but a part of him was still holding back. A part of him was

still terrified.

"Yes, it has to do with my Mark," he said instead, quieter this time. After pausing to look at her warily, he slowly dragged up the sleeve of his jumper, showing the skull and snake emblem scarred on his arm. "See the difference?"

Hermione reached out to trace the Mark, her fingers warm on his skin. It almost seemed wrong, having her touch such a frightening, evil thing, but she seemed hardly bothered by it. "It's black," she mused, a hint of intrigue in her voice. "But Theo's Mark is faint and red. Pansy's and Blaise's are too. Why?"

Draco shook his head, drawing his arm away from her. "No bloody clue," he muttered. "Even when I was in the Dark

Lord's army, my Mark always began burning before any of the others' did. Bellatrix, Dolohov and I were always the first ones summoned."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Maybe he's trying to find you."

"Impossible," Draco's lips curled in a wry smirk. "The Dark Lord doesn't give a shit about anyone but himself. Whenever we failed a mission, he'd dish out Crucios by the dozen."

She winced at the mention of the Cruciatus curse and shifted closer, her fingers sliding around his waist and her hair tickling his chin. "But you're the head Death-Eater. It's true that You-Know-Who has no clue about what love is as a concept. But it could be possible

that he's grown attached to having you by his side all these years."

"Granger, tell me you're not suggesting that the Dark Lord has any emotional ties with me. Because I can feel the remnants of dinner making a glorious comeback up my throat."

She laughed and swatted him gently. "I'm just saying. Yes, he is nothing but evil. But he's also human. He's got to have a weakness. Every evil ruler has a weakness - Hitler, Stalin, Ivan IV, Vlad - "

"I have absolutely no clue what you just said."

"They're muggle rulers, Draco."

"Fuck, Granger, you cannot possibly compare them to - "

She silenced him by pressing her lips against his, which proved entirely effective because he promptly lost all trend of thought and allowed her to kiss him, his eyes falling shut and breath hitching when she experimentally nipped at his lower lip. After a few seconds, she drew away, the smile on her face triumphant.

His eyes narrowed. Twice. She'd gotten him wrapped around her finger twice and he swore on Salazar's soul that he wasn't even surprised. "Bloody tease."

"This is actually better than the Silencing charm," she mused happily, but the smile on her face quickly faded as she returned back to the topic of conversation. "Anyway, as I was saying, every evil

ruler in history had an army, a team of fanatical supporters. You-Know-Who is no different. Like it or not, he's completely dependent on the lot of you Death-Eaters. But especially you, because you know everything there is to know about his army. He actually trusted you. There's got to be some fundamental attachment that comes along with trust. It's human nature, after all."

Draco froze. He remembered Andromeda telling him that the Dark Lord had divided his soul into fragments and kept them in magical objects called Horcruxes. Nagini the bloody snake was one, but she'd been destroyed by Longbottom. And, according to 'Dromeda, the rest of the Horcruxes had

all been destroyed three years ago.
Which could only mean one thing - the
Dark Lord was human once again.
And, like all humans, he was
defenceless.

37 | fiendfyre

3 7

f i e n d f y r e

Unleashes cursed fire.

The Forest of Dean was rife with lush greenery as the months spiralled into summer, but there was something desolated about this place that made a chill run down Draco's spine. Even Theo, who usually had a lot to say about anything and everything, was oddly quiet as they flew through the forest together

on their brooms. After what seemed like forever, the two came to a clearing deep within the forest. The Ruins was just ahead, fifty feet in front of them, but the buzz of magic alerted Draco to the fact that the wards were just up ahead.

"See anything?" Draco said lowly, feeling a rush of wind as Theo came up alongside him. The two were under Disillusionment charms, and Draco could only guess where his friend was.

"Or feel anything?"

"Yes," came Theo's snarky reply. "I feel the bloody heat and it's killing me. Do you think you can make it snow?"

Draco ignored him, being entirely used to Theo's ridiculous quips by now. Blaise or Pansy would've been a quieter

choice, but Draco had always worked best with Theo. Besides, Theo was a fantastic duellist with killer senses, so long as he kept his mouth shut. Draco needed him to stay alert and watch his back.

"Stay right here," Draco told him. With Theo's inactive Dark Mark, there was no way Theo himself could make it through without triggering anything. "If the alarm sounds, light the phials and get into the building immediately."

"I know, I know." Theo grumbled. "If you remind me one more time, I swear on Salazar's grave that I'll hex you."

"As if you fucking could."

Leaving Theo with that parting remark, Draco turned back to the task at hand. He

leaned forward, a slight movement that propelled the broom forward. He felt the faint tingle of magic gloss his cheeks as he inched through the wards and held his breath.

Nothing.

He moved forward, bit by bit, testing the wards to see if they would hold or break. To his immense satisfaction, they didn't. His jet black Mark clearly proved beneficial at a time like this. With a surge of confidence, he flew straight to the building and headed for one of the windows on the third floor. It was latched shut, but it didn't take long for him to undo the magical locks, murmuring a well-rehearsed incantation under his breath before shifting back.

"Alohomora," Draco directed the wand at the latch, and it clicked open.

And he was in.

He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding and climbed into the room, keeping his broom with him. The room was a dusty and unused one, empty and completely bare of furniture. He headed to the door, pulling it open stealthily and cringing when the door made a jarring creak. The place was empty, as he'd suspected it to be. Draco made his way quickly through the top floor, collecting every and any important piece of information he could find, stuffing the papers into his bag in a haphazard manner.

Then he came to the large doors with

brass knockers on the second floor and hesitated. He knew without a doubt that this room was the most important, and it had been his target from the very beginning. He'd been there when Bellatrix had enchanted the place and was occasionally sent to retrieve information for the Dark Lord.

Draco frowned, placing his hand on one of the brass knocker. His fingers were just itching to push the doors open - he knew he could, because he and Bellatrix and some of the top Death-Eaters had full access to the room.

But - no. Not this time. It was too risky. He drew away, but just as he did, he felt a sharp searing pain in his arm, so excruciating that he hissed out a string of

incoherent profanities and fell to his knees, curling up in a foetal position as he dragged his arm towards his chest. Merlin, it felt like his arm was fucking blazing, like someone had literally dragged him over to a pit of hellfire and dipped his bloody arm in.

And the last thing he heard before his mind began to shutter down was the high-pitched shriek of the siren, a signal that he'd somehow triggered all the wards in the place.

The Death-Eaters were coming.



For the past fifteen minutes, Hermione had watched Harry fiddle with his broom, an anxious, almost nauseated expression on his face.

The group of them were waiting a good distance away from The Ruins, well hidden behind a cluster of bushes somewhere in the Forest of Dean, waiting for Theo to give his signal. Draco had already paired the remaining six of them up based on their flying abilities on brooms. Blaise, who had been a Seeker for the Slytherin Quidditch team during their years at Hogwarts, was paired with Pansy, who had a fear of natural heights. Ginny, who'd been on the Gryffindor team, was with Luna.

Harry, on the other hand, was less than enthusiastic when Draco told him he'd be paired with Hermione. He wasn't just unenthusiastic - he was terrified.

She stepped closer to Harry now, placing a careful hand on his arm. "Everything alright?"

The black-haired wizard pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and exhaled. "Yeah - yeah, I'm fine."

Hermione studied him for a moment or two. "Is this about me falling off your broom three years ago?" His eyes widened and she shrugged. "Andromeda told me some time back."

Harry shook his head, passing a tired hand through his hair. His shoulders were almost hunched in defeat.

"Hermione, I'm so sorry. I think about that day all the time and I cannot even begin to tell you how much I regret not...holding on to you, or catching you, and I - "

"Harry, honestly, it's fine," she shushed him, easing his worries by wrapping her arms around him. "You don't have to feel sorry, or even regret that. It wasn't your fault to begin with."

Harry kept silent, his shoulders shaking from the guilt of the past. Hermione momentarily met Pansy's curious gaze over his shoulder, and the Slytherin witch rolled her eyes, mouthing 'bloody Gryffindors'. Hermione lips tilted up in an amused grin and she shook her head. Pulling back, Hermione braced her

hands on Harry's shoulders and met his green-eyed gaze. "I'm scared too," she confessed, softly. "Even though I don't remember anything about that day, or the fact that I even fell off the broom, I'm still scared. But if Draco trusts you enough to pair you up with me, then I'm going to trust his judgement. And I know that you're not going to lose me this time."

"Never, Hermione," he swore, his grip tightening on her elbows, a determined edge on his expression.

Hermione made to reply, but she suddenly froze when the phials heated inside her shirt. Exchanging a quick glance with Pansy and Blaise, who had obviously felt their own phials heat, she

shifted closer to Harry, her heart thrumming erratically as she began to fear for Draco's safety.

"Okay," Blaise murmured, climbing into his broom and lowering it so that Pansy could get on it as well. He was the one in charge of the group in Draco's absence, and Hermione thought that Blaise's calm voice made the situation a lot more bearable. "Let's go. Don't forget the Disillusionment charms."

Hermione climbed on behind Harry, latching her arms tight around his waist as they took off. The thrill of flying was something she hadn't experienced in a long time, having never been particularly adept at flying on brooms to begin with. The rush of wind nipping at her cheeks

and tangling up her hair sent an adrenaline rush through her as she kept her eyes peeled for any Death-Eaters in the distance.

Harry had cast a Disillusionment charm on them midway through, and it was an almost nerve-wrecking feeling to see the broom disappear completely, the ground racing fast a good few feet beneath them. She instinctively tightened her arms around Harry, felt him take her hand briefly to give it a reassuring squeeze, before returning his attention to flying.

It took them exactly a good forty-five seconds - as Draco had earlier calculated - to reach The Ruins. By then, the shrieking siren was absolutely deafening, and she could barely hear

anything else above the chaos. He navigated them towards the unlocked window on the third floor, and she quickly leapt off the broom the moment they were in the house, undoing the Disillusionment charms on herself.

"First floor!" She yelled to Harry, noticing that all the doors on the third were already left open. "Pansy and Blaise are putting up shields outside, but we only have a few minutes left if their shields don't hold!"

"Got it," he hollered back, reaching over to pull her towards the stairs.

Ginny and Luna were on the second floor, shelving through the rooms and yelling across the corridor to each other. She separated from Harry and headed to

the left wing, while he went to the rooms on the right. It didn't take long for her to find a study desk with a vault of files within. She hastily stuffed them into her satchel, grateful for the Extension Charm that Draco had casted earlier on for her. The next few rooms were empty, but she chanced upon a large coffer in the next room, with the familiar Dark Mark etched into the top of it. "Alohomora," she directed her wand at it, but the locks remained in place. When she tugged it, there came a clattering noise within that sounded remarkably similar to phials and glass bottles knocking against each other.

Something important was inside and she decided she was going to have to take it.

She began to lug the box out of the room, just as a loud yell came from the floor above.

"One minute!" It was Blaise, and he'd cast an Amplifying charm to magnify his voice over the siren's wail. "Time to go!"

"This isn't good," Hermione muttered her breath, and dragged the box out. "Harry?"

Harry came rushing out of the last room beside hers that moment, his eyes widening when he saw what she was struggling with. "Merlin, Hermione," he stopped abruptly, staring in disbelief at the box.

"Transfigure it, please. I've a feeling this is important."

"Okay," he took a step closer, mumbling an incantation under his breath and she watched in fascination as the box swiftly changed in appearance to a simple quill. Hermione hastily stuffed it into her bag before nodding at him. "Let's go."

"Get on," he pulled her onto the broom after him, but just then, a thunderous crash echoed through the building. "'Hermione, careful! Protego!'"

Hermione felt her eardrums almost split with the sound of rubble falling around her just as she was yanked close towards Harry, who had cast a protective shield around them. When the crashing debris had momentarily paused, she chanced a quick glance upwards, only to find that a destructive spell had

completely destroyed the third floor above.

Harry didn't waste another second. Gripping her arms tight around him, he took off, closely navigating their way through the crumbling pillars. She saw that their path was blocked by a pile of smoky debris and didn't hesitate to direct her wand at it.

"Reducto!"

The wreckage immediately shattered to bits and Harry navigated the broom through the cleared path, taking them out of the ruined building. Hermione automatically gasped when she saw three Death-Eaters battling Pansy and Blaise in the courtyard.

"Incoming, Red! On your left!"

Theo's warning came out of nowhere, but the spell hit her before she even had time to react. She toppled off balance, cried as she lost her grip on Harry and promptly fell off the broom. But his hand had latched onto her wrist before she could take the plunge, and he hauled her back up, a fierce glint of determination in his eyes.

"I'm not losing you this time," he assured her, and she wrapped her arm around him.

"Thanks, Harry."

"Hang on tight."

Hermione clutched him tighter as he suddenly dipped the broom down to avoid a hex that the Death-Eater sent their way. Keeping one arm tight around

him, she whirled around and took aim, intending to cast a knockback jinx. But as they dipped and dived, she found herself losing aim over and over again. Rapidly going through what she'd learnt from Draco, she suddenly recalled a spell and didn't hesitate to use it.

"Avis!" Instantly, a flock of birds came streaming out of her wand and she directed it in the direction of the three Death-Eaters who were attacking Pansy and Blaise. "Oppugno!"

The birds rapidly swarmed towards the three Death-Eaters, and she heard Harry laugh in approval. "Good one!"

"Let's get out of here, they're fine now!" Hermione called back, relief surging in her chest as she saw Pansy and Blaise

quickly finish the Death-Eaters off and run towards their shared broom that was propped against the wall.

"Alright - "

But a shrill, frantic scream echoed from the other side of the courtyard and Harry paused, spinning around quickly to see what had happened. "Ginny?"

Hermione's eyes widened. Harry was right, it was Ginny. She'd spent only a couple of days with the redhead witch, but she could recognise her friend's scream from anywhere. Then Luna was running across the debris, dragging a badly injured Ginny behind her. Their broom was nowhere to be found.

But right on their tails was a blazing flame like no other. Hermione couldn't

even begin to describe it - it was like an inferno that blazed powerful and lethal and consuming.

"Aguamenti!" The spell was out of Hermione's lips before she could even think.

"It doesn't work!" Harry yelled back desperately, as she shot a weak jet of water at the infernal flames. "It's Fiendfyre, you can't destroy it!"

Harry swooped the broom down, reaching out a hand to grab Ginny along the way, but Pansy and Blaise had grabbed onto both of the girls before Harry could reach them. And then Harry and Hermione were following them, zigzagging through the flames that seemed hell-bent on seeking them out.

Hermione couldn't help but glance back every so often, her heart pounding in fear. Where was Draco? She'd seen Theo awhile ago, but Draco was completely out of sight, and she was terrified for him. She almost lurched off the broom when Harry brought it to an abrupt halt. The flames were no longer behind them but up ahead, tall and curving in towards them, pushing them backwards in their path.

"Get back!" Harry yelled a warning to the group in front of him - where Pansy was barely hanging on to Luna, who was hanging on to Ginny. "Zabini, watch out!"

Blaise immediately reversed on his broom, but the sudden momentum caused

Luna to lose her grip on Ginny. And all Hermione could hear was Harry's desperate shout while she watched in helpless horror as the redhead plunged to her death, just the way she had so long ago.

Draco had been in a state of delirium. The pain had been mind-numbing, but he'd somehow dragged himself into the room, gritting his teeth and biting down so hard on his lip to keep from crying out he was certain that he had started bleeding. He pilfered feverishly through

the shelves, his one arm rendered useless because of the searing pain, and stuffed anything valuable he could find inside his bag, including a particular stone that practically buzzed with magic. And that was how Theo found him - hunched over the desk and cradling his arm possessively to his chest, mumbling expletives under his breath as he sorted through stacks of papers.

"Fuck, Draco, you triggered the alarm, didn't you?"

"Just take these," Draco rasped.

Theo didn't hesitate to cram the rest of the papers into his bag before producing a numbing potion in a small phial. "Red gave me this, just in case. Good thing she did, huh?"

Saved by Hermione Granger for the millionth time. Draco eagerly reached for the potion, downing it in one gulp. He and Theo continued to collect the documents, ignoring the sizzle of hexes outside and the screams and cackles of Death-Eaters as they began to converge on the house.

Draco hoped that Blaise and Pansy would hold their own, but he knew it wouldn't be for long. "Go," he directed Theo at last. "help them. Create a diversion - anything."

Theo didn't argue. He disappeared out of the room, just as a thundering crash made the ceiling of the room cave in. Draco barely had time to cast a protective shield around him before he

was crushed in its entirety. Blaise's protective charms were down.

Time to go.

He crawled through the debris, knowing that his broom was all but destroyed in the crash. And then he was out in the open, the sunlight blinding him momentarily and he instinctively cast a Disillusionment charm on himself. It was the wisest way to fight, when the opponent didn't know where you were.

It was still a sheer drop down, but Draco stayed where he was, hexing any incoming enemies from his position. Theo had vanished by then, having distracted a group of Death-Eaters away from ground zero. Pansy and Blaise were holding their ground, but Ginny and

Luna were barely surviving against the more skilled Death-Eaters.

A horrified shout distracted him momentarily, and he felt his heart constrict in terror when he saw Hermione hanging on for dear life as she struggled in mid-air, Potter's hand wrapped tightly around her wrist as he pulled her back up. Relief filled him just as quickly as fury did, and he didn't bat an eyelid when he shot a killing curse in the direction of the Death-Eater that had thrown Hermione off the broom in the first place.

Moments later, he was distracted by a loud, piercing scream, along with a blazing heat that was quickly beginning to consume the building whole. He knew

what it was without even having to turn. After the battle of Hogwarts so long ago, that spell had been a fixture of his nightmares. His head pounded with a destructive combination of adrenaline and terror, and there was only one thing he knew he had to do.

Run.

Without another thought, he jumped off the ledge, casting a Cushioning charm at the bottom to break his fall, stumbling a few steps when he landed. He didn't have a broom, but he was invisible, which made it a lot easier to navigate his way through the barrage of hexes and Death-Eaters that swarmed the courtyard. His other teammates were up ahead, and Draco kept his eyes fixed on

the brunette witch behind Harry. She glanced back time and time again, searching frantically for him.

But then the walls of the infernal flame ceased from behind and surged ahead, blocking their narrow escape. It created a ring around that slowly enclosed and caved in towards anyone within. Whoever had started the Fiendfyre seemed to possess perfect control of it. Draco had no doubt it was one of the top Death-Eaters.

Amidst the roaring in his ears and the dull, throbbing pain in his arm, he heard warning yells up ahead. And then there was the sound of Potter's desperate shout as his redheaded girlfriend plummeted forty-feet down.

Draco didn't even think before reacting, stopping in his stride to get a good aim at Ginny. "Aresto Momentum."

She slowed, the velocity of her fall decreasing exponentially before she collapsed gently onto the ground in a heap.

Draco didn't waste another moment. "Get her, Potter!" He yelled at the group ahead, and they turned their heads in his direction, frowning when they couldn't see him. He rushed forward, narrowly avoiding two killing curses that hurtled his way - damn those bloody Death-Eaters and their ability to sense movement even when their opponent was invisible. "Get her and get out! Partis Temporus!"

His spell split a generous-sized gap between the Fiendfyre. Blaise quickly flew off with Pansy and Luna, while Harry and Hermione swooped down for Ginny. He waited until they had escaped before releasing the spell, running towards the Fiendfyre himself. And then he was less than twenty feet, fifteen, ten. He reached out to cast the same charm on the Fiendfyre, only to stumble when a Crucio hit him out of nowhere.

"Fuck."

His vision blurred momentarily as he dropped to his knees. He was still invisible, he knew he was, but the person had managed to hex him all the same. After he was hit with several more Crucios that made him writhe in

agony, he knew it was only a matter of time before someone came to finish him off.

Gathering his wits about him, he directed his wand towards the flames again. "Partis Temporus," he rasped, exhaling in relief when he saw the flames slide apart for him. He practically crawled the last few feet, throwing himself through the gap and crumpling up onto the singed grass ahead.

Andromeda had let out a gasp when she

saw Blaise, Pansy and Luna apparate back into the house, covered in scrapes and bruises, the broom-end charred to bits. Then came Harry, Hermione and Ginny.

Hermione knew that she and Harry were relatively unscathed thanks to his nimble flying skills, but Ginny was in a bad shape. She set the redhead witch down on the sofa, leaving Harry to hover over his girlfriend anxiously, and rushed into the kitchen to grab whatever healing potions she could.

"What happened to you?" Andromeda had already begun to cast healing spells on Luna, who didn't look too well either. She had taken some pretty nasty hexes to her shoulder, and seemed rather

battered.

But the blonde witch smiled despite the split lip and shook her head. "I'm alright, Andromeda. Really."

"Where's Draco?" Andromeda glanced round the group, her eyebrows knitting in worry. "And Theo? When Theo apparated back awhile ago, he saw that none of you were here and went back again."

"Theo went back?" Blaise looked rather concerned. He winced when Hermione mumbled a spell to fix his broken wrist. "We couldn't find Draco anywhere. He was invisible but he did part the Fiendfyre for us."

"There was Fiendfyre?" Andromeda was horrified now, but Hermione tuned out

their conversation as the group began to explain things to the older woman. Where was Draco? That was the only question that looped over and over again in her mind.

She was frightened; she had insisted on going back for Draco earlier on. But Harry had dragged her off, saying that they had to stick to the plan and that Draco was never going to forgive him if he didn't bring her to safety.

"Red, Red," Pansy shook her now, breaking Hermione out of her trance. Pansy looked down at her friend and smiled softly. "You've already healed all my wounds, you can stop now."

"Sorry."

Pansy's features softened as she noticed

how Hermione's eyes were glistening and she was practically gnawing her lip raw with worry. "Draco will be fine," said Pansy, reaching forward to grasp Hermione's hand tightly. "He always pulls through somehow."

"I have to find him," Hermione whispered, brushing the back of her hand against her eyes roughly. "He's not - we couldn't even find him, maybe he's surrounded by Death-Eaters and maybe he's badly hurt. Like that time, remember? Remember? When he came back from Azkaban and that time when -"

"Hermione," Andromeda was in front of her now, her palms framing Hermione's cheeks as she held the bushy-haired

brunette at arm's length. "Hermione - breathe. Breathe."

"She's having a panic attack," Blaise explained in a low voice to Harry and Ginny, who were watching Hermione with matching looks of shock on their faces. "She almost blew up the safe-house in Godric's Hollow the last time." Harry shook his head in stunned silence as he watched Hermione. She was nodding now, her eyes fixed on Andromeda as the older witch murmured softly to her. And then Hermione was climbing to her feet, moving over to fix Blaise's wounds with a calm steadiness as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired in the previous thirty seconds. When Hermione shifted over to him to

treat his bruises, Harry simply held out his hand. Her brown eyes met his green ones and, after a moment's hesitation, she reached out and held on. Her grasp was almost frantic and desperate, even though the expression on her face was indifferent.

"He's going to come back," Harry ventured at last, making sure to speak softly. "He will. He made me promise to bring you back and he'll have to come back to make sure I kept my promise."

"Really?"

"Really, Hermione. He'll come back."

He'd better, Harry thought grimly to himself, wishing that somehow, he could telepathically transmit messages to Draco bloody Malfoy. Hermione's a

wreck without you, you stupid ferret, so
you'd better come back.

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Counter-spell for lumos.

It took exactly seventeen minutes for Draco to return back to the house.

Hermione counted.

Theo was with him, and his normally snarky façade had crumbled into one of utter worry as he dragged Draco across the living room. "There's something wrong," he yelled, almost desperately, "look at his arm."

Hermione was next to Draco in a flash, relief surging through her as she pressed a brief kiss to his sweaty forehead. But then her eyes travelled down to his Dark Mark, and she gasped in horror. He was bleeding, actually bleeding, like someone had driven a sharp knife through his skin and carved around the edges of his Mark.

Andromeda took one look at her nephew and immediately began to give out directions in her calm, authoritative voice. "Theo, Blaise, put him on the table. Pansy, take Ginny and Luna with you and make sure they sleep off their injuries. Harry, I need as many blood-replenishing potions as you can find, and tell Grus to make more. Hermione, stay

with Draco."

The group scattered, doing exactly as Andromeda requested. After Theo and Blaise had shifted Draco up on the kitchen table, they made space for Andromeda, who had started to mutter an advance-healing spell under her breath as she tried to seal up the wound.

"What took you two so long?" Blaise asked Theo, who shook his head.

"I couldn't find him," Theo explained.

"Bloody git had himself covered with a Disillusionment charm, and I didn't dare use the Revealing spell because I didn't want any of the other Death-Eaters finding him before I did. Good thing he was bleeding because that was the only way I could track him down. I found him

hiding behind those bushes that the six of you were stationed at originally, and he was in too much pain to apparate himself back."

"Are you saying he dragged himself all the way there?"

"Probably. I had to stun him before apparating because he was hexing every which way at any noise he heard," Theo shook his head, his eyebrows knitting when Draco's Dark Mark continued bleeding. "What the hell is that? What's wrong with his Mark?"

"It's never done this before," Blaise said. "Our Marks have been inactive ever since we defected."

"Not his," Hermione spoke even without realising. Her voice was soft and

strained, her eyes fixed on Draco as she calmly healed his other wounds, fingers shakily smoothing the frown on his face. "His has been jet black all this time."

"Not faded?"

"No. Never."

"It's a very dark spell," Andromeda said at last, pulling back from him. Her face was wrought with worry as she looked at Draco. Looked at Hermione looking at Draco. She didn't know which of them she worried more for. "I don't know what it is, and I don't know how to fix it, but he won't stop bleeding. I suspect it'll keep bleeding for awhile until it eventually ebbs away, but till then, just keep feeding him blood-replenishing potions. He's been hit with the Cruciatus

too - several times, in fact."

Harry returned with a tray of potions then, a sliver of concern on his face. "This is all we have," he told Andromeda, "Grus is making more, but we're running out of ingredients."

"I'll get some," Blaise volunteered, summoning his wand and getting to his feet. "Theo?"

"Yeah, I'm with you."

"Be careful, both of you," Andromeda said, casting a worried glance at the two Slytherins as their bags to head out. "Get some chocolate too. It's a good counter against Dark Magic injuries, and we don't know what Draco's is."

Blaise nodded. "Got it. Take care of him."

The two of them apparated off, leaving Hermione and Harry with Andromeda. "Okay," Andromeda took a step back, pointing her wand at Draco. "I'm going to revive him, and you two, make sure you stop whatever spell comes out of his mouth."

Hermione took position next to Draco, with Harry on the other side. Andromeda nodded at the two of them briefly before casting the spell.

"Rennervate."

Draco silver eyes flew open the next instant, unfocused and almost delirious. A feral growl ripped from his throat as he hurled himself upright, summoning his wand silently and gripping it with a murderous look on his face.

"Protego!" Andromeda cast a protective shield on Harry and Hermione. "Stop him!"

"Ava - "

Hermione's hands clamped down on Draco's mouth before the spell could be finished. Harry wrapped his hands tightly around Draco's wrist as Andromeda kept a protective shield on them, her eyes alert and frightened. She knew that her nephew had done his fair share of killing on the battlefield, but she'd never actually seen him in action before. He looked lethal, with killer instincts that rivalled Bellatrix's.

"Draco!" Hermione gripped Draco's face tightly, "look at me! Look at me!" It took about three seconds for Draco's

attention to shift into focus. The glazed look in his eyes cleared and he blinked. "Hermione?"

"Yes, it's me. You're safe now."

"Fuck, Hermione," he exhaled shakily, reaching up to slide his palms against the smooth planes of her cheeks, fingers sifting through her hair. His eyes searched her face with a frantic desperation that seemed almost vulnerable from him. "Are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she assured him, wrapping her arms tight around his neck, her mind shuttering as she inhaled him. Sweat, soap, grit, comfort. All him. She pulled away and eased him back down, even though his fingers looped around hers,

thoroughly reluctant to let go.

Funny how the roles had reversed, and Hermione was glad to be the strong one this time.

"Draco," Andromeda came up to him, handing him a blood-replenishing potion and transfiguring a nearby towel into a pillow, placing it under his head. "You have to drink this. Your Mark won't stop bleeding."

He didn't say a word as he accepted the phial from Andromeda and chugged it down. But once he finished the potion, he glanced around, eyes alert and searching. "Where're the others? Are they safe?"

"Yes, they are," Hermione brushed his hair out of his eyes, handing him another

phial that Andromeda passed to her.

"And Weaselette?"

"Ginny's fine, mate," Harry stepped forward now, gratitude in his tone as he nodded at Draco. "Thanks for saving her, I owe you one."

In spite of his injuries, Draco's lips twisted in a dry smirk. "You did save Granger. I had to reciprocate the favour." Harry smiled, a flicker of mutual understanding exchanged between them as they stared at each other. "I promised, mate. Won't let anything happen to 'Mione again."

Andromeda smiled at them. "It's nice to see the both of you finally getting along." "This isn't getting along," Draco said flatly. "I still think he's an aggravating

wank."

Andromeda's mouth fell open.

"Language, Draco! Teddy may hear!"

"Teddy deserves to know how much of a wank his godfather is. And on that note, 'Dromeda, I cannot fucking believe you chose Potter-wank to be Teddy's godfather."

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's good to have you back, ferret."

"Tergeo."

The last of the blood from Draco's arm vanished and Hermione leaned back, relieved that his Dark Mark had stopped bleeding. It had taken close to half an

hour, and Andromeda made sure that Draco had enough potions to prevent him from bleeding himself dry.

"Granger."

Hermione looked up at him. He'd been sitting in silence for awhile now. When Andromeda and Harry were still around, he'd been his usual snarky, arrogant self. But now that they were gone, he was finally allowing the cracks of his exhaustion to surface.

He plucked her wand neatly from her fingers and set it down, before pulling her close. Hermione went willingly, sliding between his legs as he sat on the edge of the table, letting him wrap his arms around her.

"You had a panic attack, didn't you?" He

asked quietly, absentmindedly tangling one of his fingers through a lock of her stubborn curls.

"How did you know?"

"You're behaving the same way you did back at Godric's Hollow."

And now Hermione finally allowed herself to break, her calm composure crumbling to pieces as she choked back a sob against his chest. "I couldn't help it," she mumbled, her voice muffled against his shirt, "I thought I'd lost you."

His arms tightened around her and he was silent for so long she began to wonder if he'd heard her. But when he finally spoke, his voice was just as broken as hers. "Me too."

Hermione stayed in Draco's arms for a

few minutes, hardly wanting to let go now that he was back. She knew that she was a lot stronger than she had been months ago, but there were times when fear seized her heart and she found herself spiralling back to the past.

It doesn't matter, she told herself now, so long as he's here and I can pick myself up again.

A sudden throat-clearing made the both of them turn, only to see Harry and Ginny standing by the doorway of the kitchen. While Ginny was simply surveying them with a general air of amusement, Harry looked more than awkward, looking anywhere but at them. "Malfoy," Ginny greeted pleasantly, running a hand through her dishevelled

hair and stepping towards them. "Just wanted to thank you for saving my life - again."

"Death must be going crazy knowing that I helped you escape his clutches twice," Draco drawled, his signature smirk spreading across his face as he surveyed them lazily. "Well, you know what they say - third time's a charm."

"Draco!" Hermione elbowed him in jest, but when he let out a hiss of pain, she immediately gasped. "Oh, Merlin, I'm so sorry!"

"I'm fine," Draco muttered through gritted teeth. Her elbows were actually pointier than they looked - he hadn't braced himself because he didn't think they'd hurt so much, but clearly they

could. She picked up her wand, ignoring Harry and Ginny completely in her worry, but he pulled back. "Really, don't worry about it, Granger. Go talk to your friends."

"What, are we not your friends?" Ginny sounded so affronted that both Hermione and Harry had to stifle their grins.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Weaselette, but no."

"Pity. I would love to see my brother's face if I introduced you as my friend."

"That is tempting, but unfortunately, I make it a rule of thumb not to get well acquainted with anyone during a war," Draco's face was impassive, but there was a hard edge in his tone, one that warned her not to push.

"Ginny and I will be heading back soon," Harry said, tactfully switching the subject, "and we thought that since we'll be passing by the headquarters anyway, we could pass the documents we retrieved to Shackbolt."

Hermione followed Draco as he headed out to the living room to retrieve all the papers he'd collected. "Speaking of heading back, Harry," she said, as she and Draco sorted through the documents on the coffee table, keeping the important ones and discarding the rest. "Where do you live?"

"The Burrow," Harry replied. "It's just a couple of miles from here. It was destroyed after the war but Ginny and I fixed it."

"You are aware that a burrow is a bloody hole dug by small animals like rabbits, aren't you?" Draco muttered, not looking at them as he scanned through the papers.

Harry rolled his eyes and pointedly ignored him. "Anyway, Ginny and I have been living there for some years now," he explained to Hermione, who was staring at him in fascination, clearly having forgotten that bit of the past too. "Ron and the other Weasleys are scattered among the other Order's bases."

"They do a lot of fighting, get into a lot of battles," Ginny sighed. "They say it's easiest to live with the other Order members. The Burrow reminds Mum of

Fred, and she tries to stay away as much as she can."

Hermione watched as a shadow crossed Ginny's face briefly. Obviously, Fred's death had wrecked the Weasley family. She couldn't help but wonder how Ron was coping.

Leaving the other three to sort through the papers, Hermione reached for the quill in her bag and set it on the floor. Draco looked over at her and she smiled. "Reverse the transfiguration on this, please."

He quickly cast a wordless spell on it. The quill instantly reversed back into its original form and he raised his eyebrows. "Granger, where did you get that?" Something in his voice told her

that he knew exactly what it was.

"In one of the rooms. I figured it was important since it was locked tight."

"Step away from that."

Hermione obligingly shifted closer to him, her eyes wide. "What's in there?"

Draco cast a swift glance around, noticing the way Harry and Ginny were staring at him with matching expressions of confusion and curiosity. Then he looked at Hermione and sighed. "Fine," he held his wand up, muttering a complex incantation underneath his breath before drawing his wand in the shape of an eight. "Morsmordre."

The Mark on the box lit up and the catches opened with sharp clicks. Draco's lips curled in a half-hearted

smirk when he saw the horrified look on Harry's face. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, Potter. There isn't a bloody Dark Mark floating above 'Dromeda's house."

"Then why did you use that incantation?"

"Because this incantation can do many other things besides conjuring Dark Marks," Draco returned flatly, but he didn't elaborate further. Instead, he simply pushed up the lid, showing them the array of potions within. Hermione summoned Blaise's potion book from the shelf nearby and flipped through it, her mind buzzing with the familiar curiosity she always had whenever learning something new.

"Regeneration Potion," Ginny read the label on one of the phials over Draco's

shoulder, shifting closer so she could get a better look. "What's that for?"

"Ask Potter - he knows best."

At Draco's words, everyone turned to Harry, who bit his lip, his green eyes stormy with memories of the past. "It's for wizards who've suffered bodily damage. This restores them back to full form."

"Oh, the Order definitely needs this," Ginny made to grab for the potion, but Draco immediately gripped her wrist, his fingers digging tight into her skin.

"Don't fucking touch that," his voice was low.

"Yeah, Ginny, don't," Harry hastily concurred, reaching over so he could pull his girlfriend away. "It's a Dark

potion. You-Know-Who used it to return to his full form when he tried to duel me at Little Hangleton graveyard. During my fourth year, remember?"

"Oh," Ginny quickly backed away from it, her eyes wide. "Sorry. I didn't realise."

"It's said that the potion is made from the bone taken from the Dark Wizard's father, the flesh willingly sacrificed from one of his servants and the blood forcibly extracted from one of his foes," Hermione read aloud, and looked up from the book, turning her gaze to Harry. "Did You-Know-Who extract blood from you?"

"Yeah." Harry nodded slowly before turning back to sorting the papers,

clearly not wanting to reminisce any further.

Draco shut the box and locked it up again. "We're not giving this to the Order," he said flatly, pointedly ignoring the blatant surprise from Ginny.

"Why?"

Draco shot her an impatient look. "Because these are all Dark potions. There's a fucking Rudimentary Body potion in there that contains the venom of Nagini. Do you really want your friends in the Order to be drinking that?"

"So you're going to keep it? You? An ex Death-Eater?"

"No," he returned mildly and got to his feet. "Granger's going to keep it, since she's our Healer anyway. Is that safe

enough for you, Weaselette?"

Without waiting for her reply, he headed up the stairs; going straight to the room he shared with Hermione on the third floor. The day's activities had finally exhausted him, and he kicked his shoes off, throwing himself down on the bed.

Several moments later, the door opened with a soft creak. Hermione stepped in tentatively, shutting the door behind her and murmuring the incantation for a muffling charm under her breath. Then she set her shoes aside as well, shrugged out of her jacket and curled up on the bed next to him. He draped a lazy arm around her, pulling her in close.

"I'm sorry about what they said," she said softly, after several minutes of

silence.

Draco kept his eyes shut, even though his arm tightened around her. "It's fine, Granger. I'm used to it. You don't have to apologise for them."

"I just wish they wouldn't."

"I haven't exactly given them a reason to trust me," he mumbled, looking anywhere but at her. "I used Morsmordre in front of them - you should've seen Potter's face, he looked livid enough to haul me off to Azkaban. Just give them time, Granger." He sounded rather amused now, his silver eyes twinkling as he watched her. "I thought you were supposed to be the rational, sensible one."

"Oh, I am. But just because you use Dark

Magic and know about Dark Potions doesn't make you a bad person."

He reached for her hand, pulling it up to his lips and sponging heated kisses across her knuckles. It was fire on ice; his lips hot on her cold hands, igniting her feverish nerves and making her breath hitch accordingly. "I appreciate that," he mused, looking rather satisfied when he noticed the way her irises darkened to an alluring, sentient brown. "But I honestly don't give a fuck what your friends think of me."

"Good," she leaned forward and pressed her lips briefly against his, smiling when his fingers tightened instinctively on her hips. "Because you shouldn't."

His lips curved and he was just about to

reply when he paused. "Hold on," he blinked, as though suddenly remembering something. "I've got something to give to you."

"What is it?"

"One second."

His hand left her hips and reached into his pocket. Hermione grinned, suddenly remembering a conversation she had with the three other Slytherins some days ago. "Draco, if you bring out an erection, I'm not going to be very impressed," she deadpanned.

Draco's eyes widened fractionally in sheer surprise before narrowing, trying to keep a straight face despite the fact that his lips were twitching in amusement. "Who taught you that?"

"No one. Gryffindors can be very mouthy."

"I can see that," he swiftly captured her lips in a heated kiss, his hand reaching back up to sink his fingers into her mess of curls. All Hermione could register at that moment was the heavy clash of his breath on her skin as he completely stole her breath away - and she thought, not just my breath, but my heart, everything - but then he was dragging away far too soon, eyes searing with heat when she let out a disappointed whimper beneath him.

"But," he continued mildly, "that statement was too crude and Slytherin for you." He paused, eyes gleaming challengingly. "Was it Pansy?"

"Theo."

"I knew it." And then Draco blinked almost warily. "Why was Theo talking about me?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, even though her cheeks promptly reddened. "He wasn't talking about you. He was just telling us what he did to one of his slags. Apparently, he told the girl that he was going to show her - and I quote - 'a prized jewel like none other', and she believed him, so he went ahead and unzipped his pants."

Draco groaned, wishing he hadn't asked for an explanation to begin with. "For fuck's sake."

"Apparently, it worked really well too. She was really drunk though, so I think

that might've been a contributing factor," Hermione added, with a faint wrinkle of her nose, before looking up at him. "Okay, so what did you want to give me?"

Draco's mood immediately grew serious as he reached into his pocket. He found the stone that he'd nicked from the room back at the Ruins earlier and placed it into Hermione's hand, closing her fingers over it.

Hermione slowly unfurled her fingers, shifting so that she could examine it properly. When she had finally gotten a better look at it, her eyes widened. "Is that - "

"The Resurrection Stone?" He nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on the silver

piece. "I didn't realise what it was when I picked it up. But when I was fighting the Death-Eaters earlier, I remembered what you showed me in the book that 'Dromeda sent you for Christmas.'"

"Wait, so the Peverells already had this?"

Draco exhaled. Ever since defecting, he hadn't bothered himself with the Peverells. Knowing that the Cloak was safe with Hermione was sufficient, because that meant the three Deathly Hallows would never be united. "I think so," he said slowly. "The room I found it in can only be accessed by the Death-Eaters closest to the Dark Lord. Bellatrix and I have full access, but so do MacNair and Dolohov and a couple

of others. Since MacNair's part of the Peverells, I have no doubt that he placed the Stone there for safe-keeping purposes, only to retrieve it once he's found the other two Deathly Hallows."

"So we have two out of three?"

"You have two out of three. I gave you the Cloak, now you have the Stone."

Hermione bit her lip. "This isn't safe, Draco," she murmured, sounding rather anxious. "The book said that whoever possesses all three becomes the Master of Death. Why don't you keep the Stone, since I already have the Cloak?"

"Can't," and he shut his eyes briefly. His voice was barely inaudible and Hermione had to strain her ears to hear him. "The Stone brings back people from

the dead. And I have too many dead people I want to see alive again."

Hermione didn't argue with him after that. Sliding the Stone into the pocket of her shorts, she shifted closer and wrapped an arm around him, placing her fingers flat on the planes of his firm chest, just above his heart and feeling the unsteady thuds within.

Each beat seemed more broken than the previous.

She found him by the Pensieve again that night, his wand lighting a dim glow in the room.

Draco was calmer this time and lifted

his head when she slid her palm up his back. "Missing her again?" She asked him, stepping close and leaning her head against his shoulder, staring at the grey mist within the basin.

He wrapped an arm around waist, bracing his other hand on the rim of the Pensieve. "Everyday." He was silent for a moment, and then he looked at her. "Do you want to see it?"

"Really?" Hermione couldn't quite keep the surprise from her voice. Draco was always so closed-off, and the memories in the phials were some of his most guarded secrets. She was more than flattered that he allowed her to see them. He shifted aside. "Go ahead."

She sneaked another glance at him, and

he nodded. So she went in. It felt like apparition, or being pulled to a different place by a Portkey. A convoluted haze of memories before the Pensieve finally settled on one.

Within seconds, she found herself transported to the Malfoy Manor, and she was standing by the window, watching a regal, blond woman stare at her son through the stately windows. Draco, young Draco, a fair blonde barely six years old, was playing in the vast field all alone. Hermione felt a tug in her chest at the sight of that.

The blond woman was murmuring to herself and Hermione inched closer, straining her ears to hear what she said. She was whispering protections,

chanting them over and over again like an age-old mantra. And then she pressed her palm flat against the window, eyes glistening as she stared out at her son.

"I wish you knew how much I love you," she said, her voice barely audible.

"Narcissa." The woman straightened and whirled around. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a hard face descended the stairs, eyeing her with disapproval. "I told you not to coddle him. He knows you're standing there. Just leave him alone, he's fine."

The next few memories ran along the same lines. Draco left alone to his own devices. Draco studying alone. Draco reading in the vast library alone. Draco wandering through the Malfoy Manor

alone. Alone, alone, alone.

And then Narcissa was seeing him off at Hogwarts, and this time, he pulled away from her when she held her arms out. "I'm fine, mother, I'll see you when term ends."

"Write to me, Draco."

Eleven-year old Draco ignored her and pushed his luggage cart down the platform. He never wrote to her or his father. Then there were tea parties, lavish afternoons with the tittering of nosy, rich ladies who thrived on nothing but gossip. Narcissa Malfoy sat in the centre of it all, but there was talk -

"Oh, Narcissa Malfoy - yes, wife of Lucius Malfoy, she's a beauty but just a trophy wife."

"Not quite, I hear Lucius Malfoy dotes on his wife and son quite a lot."

"Nevertheless - I hear her sister is in Azkaban and her other sister married a Mudblood!"

Narcissa Malfoy blocked them out. She had a loving husband and a wonderful son and they were all that mattered to her. But fast-forward years later, and the man with the serpentine eyes and hollowed-out soul was sitting in her living room, her house, with her family.

"Lucius," she pleaded to him in the hallway, once the Silencing charms were set. "I beg you, don't do this to Draco."

"Now, Narcissa - "

"You know he cannot do this! I refuse to let my son, my son - "

"Mother, do be quiet," Draco was standing in the hallway now, his frame tall and broad just like his father's. "I want to do this. It's all I've ever wanted."

And his father clapped him on the back and smiled proudly, and Draco's eyes lit in sheer happiness. Not of what he was about to do, but because he finally had the acknowledgement of his father. Then Narcissa Malfoy was watching the man with the serpentine eyes scar her son with the Dark Mark. She cried that night in one of the bathrooms. Lucius didn't hear her. Nor did Draco. She never cried again after that night.

There were meetings after that, Death-Eaters skulking around the Malfoy

Manor. Her house was invaded by evil and goodness no longer preceded. Her sister Bellatrix's laugh echoed down the hallways as she trained Draco, day in, day out. Draco at breakfast with bloodshot eyes and a haggard frame. Draco in the library staring at the Dark Mark on his arm. Draco sitting by the window ledge in the middle of the night, looking out, never in.

Narcissa made to go to him but was stopped by a firm hand on her shoulder. "No, Narcissa," Lucius's face gave no room for argument. "Leave him. He needs to learn."

Narcissa found herself standing in front of Draco's room one night. She pressed her ear against the door and heard him

scream. "Lumos," she whispered and her wand lit. She went in, only to find Draco tossing and turning on his bed, waist deep in a nightmare that made all of Hermione's seem to pale in comparison. Hermione watched as Narcissa hovered near Draco for a moment, before tapping her wand to his forehead.

"Legilimens."

Several memories later, Hermione found herself in an unfamiliar room. Bellatrix's eyes were gleaming in the dark as she watched Severus Snape and Narcissa murmur among themselves. Hermione took a step closer as Narcissa took Snape's hand.

"...will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to

perform?"

"I will."

A strange magic surged forth from Bellatrix's wand and sealed their hands. The moment the spell was cast, Narcissa snatched her hand away and swept out of the room. And then Narcissa was watching Draco as he stood outside the Manor several days later, surrounded by other Death-Eaters.

Narcissa pressed her palm against the window and shut her eyes. "Still love you."

It was a flurry of hazed memories after that. Narcissa Malfoy sat in the hall with the other Death-Eaters, the only one without a Dark Mark engraved on her arm. Deaths and more deaths. Screaming

from the cellar. Then Hermione saw a younger version of herself being tortured by Bellatrix, what were the words now? Narcissa stepped closer to peer over Bellatrix's shoulder -

M U D B L O O D

"Please," rasped the younger Hermione, almost delirious with pain, her eyes fixed on Narcissa. "Please save me." Narcissa blinked, turned away and left the room. Several memories and a plethora of Crucios later, Hermione saw a frail, aged Narcissa standing by the window. Then Draco was behind her, his shoulders hunched and face unguarded. "Mother?"

Narcissa turned. And Draco spoke the two words that Hermione had never heard from him before, never thought possible to hear from him before:

"I'm scared."

Narcissa's arms were around Draco in an instant. And her arms were around him when he continued to have nightmares night after night. She gave him her wand and Lucius gave his to the man with the serpentine eyes - but they were powerful and didn't need their wands to do magic. They managed well on their own. And then Narcissa was trekking through the forest with Lucius and the other Death-Eaters, her dark skirts swishing against the battered leaves and foliage.

"Is he alive?" Narcissa was whispering now, as she leaned over Harry Potter, her hand over his heart. "Draco, is he alive?"

"Yes," breathed Harry.

Narcissa got to her feet, turning to face the other Death-Eaters and the man with the serpentine eyes. They were all waiting to know the fate of Harry Potter. "He is dead."

But Harry Potter was not dead. There was chaos thereafter; hexes and spells flew in every different direction as Hermione watched Narcissa and Lucius charge through the foray in search for Draco. Moments later, Harry Potter had lost the battle with a resounding explosion as McGonagall barely

managed to save his life with a powerful shield.

Narcissa pulled her husband into a secret alcove, amidst the celebratory cheers and shouts from the other Death-Eaters. "Find Draco and keep him safe - "

"Narcissa, the Dark Lord will come for you, for us." Lucius's indifferent façade had crumbled to pieces now. "The three of us can leave this place and we'll be safe."

"We will never be safe and we can never run from him!" She took his hands in hers. "It's alright, Lucius. I made my choice. And I love you," she met his gaze softly, "But you must find Draco and protect him - "

"Narcissa - "

"Keep him safe, Lucius. No matter what the cost."

Narcissa vanished in the blink of an eye, and Hermione had a mere second to see the broken look on Lucius's face - far too similar to Draco's - before she found herself dragged into another memory.

"Lumos," the wand was lit and Narcissa was staring at a photo frame in the hallway, with an empty phial in her other hand. The halls of the Malfoy Manor was silent, so silent that Hermione thought she could almost hear Narcissa's heart racing.

"I made my choice," Narcissa repeated to herself, but her shoulders were quaking in fear. "I'm afraid. But this is

what I have to do. Love you," she pressed her fingers to her lips, before reaching up, touching her fingers briefly to the older blonde man in the photograph. Then she did the same to the younger one. "Love you too. Always." She stared at the moving photograph for awhile before turning away. And then Hermione practically raced after Narcissa as the older woman headed down the hallway at a rapid pace, her dark skirts sweeping across the dusty floors.

"Nox."

And the light in Narcissa Malfoy's wand was extinguished, and so was she.

The last of Narcissa's memories faded away when Hermione lifted her head

from the Pensieve. Draco was seated on the ledge by the window as he waited for her, his face illuminated by the moonlight as he studied the phials in his hands. The moment she shifted away from the Pensieve, he looked up.

"Done?"

Hermione nodded and went to him. His arm readily looped around her waist and she rest her head against his shoulder. "What happened to your mother after the battle?"

Draco dragged in a deep breath. "She stayed at the Malfoy Manor for some days," his voice so quiet that Hermione had to strain her ears to hear him. "And when the Dark Lord found her, she just turned herself in. She knew she was

going to die, and she wasn't afraid."

"She was a very brave woman," Hermione said, feeling her chest tighten at the pain in Draco's voice. "She saved my life. And so did you."

He shifted his head so that his lips pressed against her forehead briefly, but he didn't say a word. Hermione sat there in the silence with him as minutes and hours ticked by, feeling his fingers intertwine and untangle from hers, again and again and again. Draco finally fell asleep with his head against her shoulder, blonde hair tickling the edge of her collarbone.

And Hermione wrapped her arms around him and stared at the wand next to the Pensieve.

"Nox."

39 | immobulus

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i m m o b u l u s

Renders living targets immobile.

It was Luna who told them about the party.

The blonde witch had apparated back to the house several days later, a cheerful smile on her face as she slipped into an empty chair at the table. "Everyone in the Order's really excited to have you back," she said to Hermione, who gave a faint smile in return, "and you too."

This was directed at Harry, who had come over to Andromeda's for breakfast with Ginny. In fact, the two came over on an almost daily basis. Draco was dreading the day that Andromeda would ask them to move in too, which could only be a matter of time now.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Me?" He asked, almost sceptically, "why're they excited about having me?"

"You haven't been fighting with the Order for a long time, Harry," Andromeda said softly. "I think they've all been waiting for you to make a return for awhile now."

Luna agreed. "So the D.A. is throwing a party - "

"D.A.?" Pansy frowned in confusion.

Theo and Blaise looked equally puzzled. "Dumbledore's Army," Ginny explained, before shooting a pointed look at Draco. "The same group that Draco and Delores Umbridge tried to demolish during our fifth year. Too bad they couldn't."

Draco threw her a frosty glare and continued eating.

"Dumbledore's Army, huh?" Theo shook his head. "That's a bloody tacky name."

"Hermione came up with it."

"Oh, makes sense, Red always comes up with tacky things like that - ow, fuck!"

Theo winced when Hermione kicked him under the table. "Draco, mate, control your girlfriend!"

Draco simply reached over to steal a slice of ham from Theo's plate and

placed it on Hermione's. "Don't bring me into this."

"Anyway," continued Luna, brightly, "they'll be glad to see all of you tomorrow night."

An awkward silence descended upon the table. While Ginny looked excited about being reunited with her friends, Harry and Hermione looked far less enthusiastic. And the Slytherins seemed completely disinterested.

"Okay, first of all," Theo was the first to break the silence, and he held out his fork, pointing it at Luna while he talked, "inviting four strangers to a party is bad enough. Second of all, inviting four Slytherins to a party with members of the other houses is far worse. And to take

the icing off the bloody cake - do remember that you're inviting four Death-Eaters to a party with people who've been fighting on the opposite side for three years. What are we supposed to say? 'Hi, nice party; by the way, I killed your relative because the Dark Lord told me to!'"

Draco wordlessly cast a Silencio on Theo before he could say anything else. Ginny and Harry now looked thoroughly uncomfortable, while Luna was biting her lip.

Andromeda cleared her throat delicately. "Theo, you don't have to go if you don't want to - "

"That's good," Theo's lips curled in satisfaction as he leaned back in his

chair lazily. "'Cause I'm not going."

" - but you're wrong to say that no other Slytherin will be there. If I'm not mistaken, I do believe that Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass joined the Order some months ago. They'll probably be there."

"Yes, they will," Luna quickly affirmed.

Pansy leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with interest. "Tracey and Daphne? Really?" She exchanged a look with Blaise before looking over at Theo. "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, Theo. You know Tracey and Daphne, don't you?"

"I know them well," mused Theo, amidst a chorus of disgusted noises from the others. "But so does Draco, by the way - ow, fuck!" He doubled up when he felt

another half-hearted kick under the table. "Control yourself, Malfoy!"

Hermione winked. "Actually, that wasn't him, that was me again. If Draco really wanted to hurt you, he would've killed you," she added, with a teasing laugh.

Draco raised his mug of coffee and smirked, intertwining his fingers through hers under the table. "Definitely the brightest witch of our age."

"Theodore Nott, for the millionth time, get your lazy arse off the sofa and come with us!" Pansy yelled from across the hall. After much convincing, she had finally worn Hermione down, who

reluctantly agreed to go to the party. Blaise hadn't required much convincing on his part - he was just as eager to see Tracey and Daphne as she was. Draco had only agreed to go because Hermione was, quite frankly, terrified of meeting all her old friends.

So that left Theo.

Lazy, devil-may-care Theo, who didn't budge an inch, despite all her yelling.

"I'm not going!" Theo hollered back stubbornly. "Teddy and I are going to go to bed at nine tonight, and Andromeda is going tuck us in, read a story and then sing lullabies to us!"

"No, Andromeda's not!" Andromeda called from the kitchen.

Hermione heard all the commotion

outside and grinned, shaking her head in mirth. She was in the bedroom she shared with Draco, but she'd asked him to leave so that she could dress herself. And as she stared at the dress Pansy had Transfigured for her, she couldn't help but feel nervous.

"Granger?" A knock came on the door. It was Draco. "Are you done? Pansy's yelling my bloody ear off and Blaise is having an aneurysm because we're late." In spite of her nerves, Hermione laughed. "Almost done!" Taking a deep breath, she pressed a palm flat against the mirror, staring at her reflection. "It's going to be fine," she whispered, feeling apprehension coursing through her veins as she noticed the fear in her eyes.

"Draco will be there. It'll be fine."

Truth be told, she was still wondering if it was the best decision. Meeting Neville, Harry and Ginny had already taken its toll on her - she just wasn't sure if she could handle seeing everyone else all at once.

Shoving her fears aside for the moment, she picked up her wand and headed towards the door. Draco was leaning against the wall beside the room, his blonde hair and fair skin a stark contrast with the black blazer and pants he had on. He glanced up the moment she stepped out, hair falling into his eyes carelessly as stared at her.

For a moment, he seemed to fumble for a coherent response, and Hermione smiled

at his reaction. But when he opened his mouth to speak, she held up a finger to stop him. "One moment, please," she said, directing her wand at her black dress. "Colovaria."

The dress instantly lightened to an iridescent midnight green, the same shade of the jumper that she'd knitted for him as a Christmas present. His silver eyes gleamed and he closed the gap between them, gripping her hips firmly and pulling her flush against him. "You look beautiful in green," he mumbled, punctuating each word with a soft kiss on her lips. "I don't know what the bloody Sorting Hat was thinking putting you in Gryffindor."

Hermione smiled up at him, looping her

arms around his neck and pulling his head down so that his lips now met hers firmly. Her tongue traced the seam of his lips; an instinctive action that mirrored what he'd done several times before, and felt her stomach tighten deliciously when a muffled groan escaped his throat. He let her in, and she let her tongue intertwine with his, experimentally, boldly, matching his feverish kisses as her heart hammered in her chest.

"Hermione!" Pansy's yell came from two floors below but effectively ruined the moment all the same.

Draco reluctantly pulled away, leaning his forehead against hers as he fought to catch his breath. "We should go."

Hermione frowned in disappointment,

before a wicked grin curled on her lips. "Or we could just forget about the party. I believe I haven't showed you how fantastic I look in red yet, which you will find out if you look under - "

He hit her with a wordless Silencio before swearing under his breath. "You, Ms Granger, are turning into a wicked minx before my eyes and you need to stop having these conversations with Pansy," he said firmly, and removed the Silencing charm.

"Actually, it was 'Dromeda,' she said, her smile widening when he swore again.

"You need to stop having these kind of conversations with my Aunt too."

Hermione began to laugh, but a series of

yells from below made the two of them exchange startled glances, before rushing down the stairs. The sight that greeted them in the living room was almost comical - Blaise was holding Theo down while Pansy was mumbling an incantation under her breath, pointing her wand in their direction. And Theo himself was yelling in horror as his clothes slowly transformed into a casual suit that was clearly meant for the party. Andromeda was holding Teddy in the corner and the two looked thoroughly entertained, Teddy babbling happily in her arms.

"Don't just stand there, mate!" Theo yelled at Draco, "help me!"

"My apologies," Draco said swiftly,

heading towards them with Hermione in tow. He pointed the wand at Theo. "Colovaria."

Instantly, Theo's suit turned a brilliant shade of crimson that practically sparkled. Blaise and Pansy doubled up laughing, while Theo unleashed a series of expletives that sent Andromeda hurrying out of the room with Teddy.

Hermione chuckled. Feeling a pang of sympathy for Theo, she pushed Draco aside and held out her hand. "I'll stay with you the whole night, promise."

Theo quirked an eyebrow at her. "Can I take the piss out of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs?"

"Only to me. And I promise not to say a word about it."

"Deal."

They shook and Hermione held her wand up to him. "Colovaria."

The suit darkened to a nondescript grey that made Theo grin in satisfaction.

"Thanks, Red."

Blaise nudged Draco, looking at him in amusement. "Did your girlfriend just ditch you for Theo over there?"

"Apparently so," Draco muttered, but when Hermione looked over at him, her eyes bright with laughter and lips curving in a warm smile, he understood perfectly why Hermione seemed to have all four of them wrapped around her finger.

It wasn't just him - Blaise, Pansy and Theo would do anything for Hermione

Granger. It was the light on her face and the fact that she was just pure goodness in a cruel world. They were attracted to her goodness even though she made them feel pure evil sometimes, but the fact that she liked them made them realise that they were not completely lost. Not yet, at least.

The party was hosted in one of the bigger rooms of the Order's headquarters. Luna, who had dropped by Andromeda's house and was now leading them to the party, told them that the D.A. had planned this for days. "They've been really excited to see

Hermione," Luna was saying, as she held her lighted wand out to pave the way for them. The path leading to the Order's headquarters was dark, and Draco kept his eyes and ears peeled the whole time for any signs of imminent danger. It was a war. You never let your guard down.

"Ever since Neville told them that Hermione was back, they've been asking to see her," Luna continued, throwing a brief glance over her shoulder to talk to the five behind her. "But McGonagall's given strict orders that no one visit Andromeda's unless invited."

"That's funny," Theo drawled. "You've shown up dozens of times uninvited."

"I know, I just find myself there sometimes," Luna returned cheerily.

"The D.A.'s really impressed by the work you guys have done - rescuing Ginny, helping McGonagall, and even getting Harry back on the field. I think you'll all be welcomed with open arms."

But Luna was overly optimistic as usual. Because the moment the four Slytherins and Hermione stepped through the doors, they heard a sudden hush descend upon the room, the atmosphere thicken to something akin to unease and suspicion. Hermione instinctively sidled closer to Draco and slipped her hand through his.

"Hermione?"

Someone pushed their way through the crowd - a redhead that could hardly be mistaken for anyone other than a member of the Weasley family. But not just any

member of the Weasley family - this particular Weasley had bright blue eyes, freckles dotting his face and strode towards them with an expression torn between astonishment and disbelief.

Pansy sucked in a breath. "Is that - "

"Oh, this'll be good," Theo chuckled under his breath, as Harry and Ginny hastily rushed after Ron, matching looks of panic on their faces.

Ronald Weasley stopped several feet in front of them, staring at Hermione like he could hardly believe that she was real. "Hermione?" He repeated, shaking his head. "I was away for weeks and no one told me you were back! I can't believe it's really you!"

Draco relaxed his grip on Hermione

then, even though his heart was screaming at him not to. But the more rational side of him knew that she was more than capable of making her own decisions, and that she'd chosen him.

Only Hermione made the mistake of glancing briefly at him before turning back to Ron. And the expression on Ron's face immediately darkened, but she didn't notice. Instead, she stepped forward and smiled hesitantly, holding up a hand for him to shake.

"Hi, Ron. It's great to see you again," she murmured, but her eyes widened when she finally saw the look on his face. She withdrew her hand, instinctively shifting towards Draco again.

Ron's eyes darted between Hermione

and Draco several times before finally landing on her. He swallowed roughly, his voice promptly taking on a sharp edge to it. "What's going on?"

Theo sniggered. "Well, dear Weasley, let me explain - " His words were promptly cut off when Blaise pulled him back, Pansy casting a wordless Silencing charm on him.

"Ron, mate," Harry stepped forward, his calm voice attempting to diffuse the tension in a placating manner. "There's something you need to know. Malfoy found Hermione some months ago and she's been living with him, Theo, Blaise and Pansy ever since. They're now living at Andromeda's."

Ron's face turned an alarming shade of

red and Draco had to forcibly push down the urge to keep his mouth shut, instead of making a snarky comment which he was certain wouldn't be appreciated at a time like this. The other D.A. members were already regarding them with suspicion, some of them looking ready to step in and start hexing whenever necessary.

"She's been living with Death-Eaters?"

Blaise stepped-forward, holding a hand back to prevent Theo from doing anything rash. "Defected Death-Eaters."

"The same one who stood there and watched his bloody Aunt torture and then carve the word Mudblood on Hermione's arm! He watched and didn't do a single bloody thing the whole time!

Or have we all forgotten that?"

Draco noticed Hermione shifting her scarred arm behind her back self-consciously and rapidly lost his temper. "Don't fucking go there, Weasel," he snapped, "you know I didn't have a choice - "

"You were a bloody coward!"

"Ron!" Hermione's eyes were wide. "I remember that but it doesn't matter now."

"Doesn't matter - Merlin, what happened to you?"

Ginny laid a hand on her brother's shoulder. "There's something else you should know, Ron," she swallowed, as though the words were difficult to get out. "About Hermione, she doesn't, um, well, you see - "

"It's okay, Ginny," Hermione hastily said, stepping forward to explain it herself. She met Ron's gaze firmly, despite the fact that her heart was racing. "The truth is - I've lost a lot of my memories. I was captured, and the Death-Eaters - "

"Them?" Ron's eyes darted to the four Slytherins behind her.

"No, not them!" Hermione fervently shook her head. "Other Death-Eaters, they used the Cruciatus on me for about - " she paused, eyes shutting briefly as she took a deep breath, " - three years, until Draco found me. And I think the curses broke my mind and I've forgotten a lot of things since then."

Ron's eyes were guarded. "Hermione,

what're you saying? Did you forget us?"

"I - "

"You forgot about me?"

Hermione fell a step back. "I didn't mean to! I forgot about Harry, and a lot of other people and things that happened! I just have more distinct memories of some people and less distinct ones of others."

"More distinct memories?" Ron repeated, looking ready to explode. He firmly shook off Harry and Ginny's pleas for him to keep his cool. "Are you saying you actually remember some people but not Harry or me? Or any of the things we did?"

Hermione twisted her hands in worry. "It's not that simple - "

"You said you remembered Malfoy watching Bellatrix torture you. So you remembered that? You actually remember Malfoy the bloody ferret?" Hermione's hesitance was answer enough, and Ron's eyes flashed in fury. "You remember the person who tortured you and made your life hell for years, and who was willing to watch you die because he and his worthless parents were too useless - "

Ron was cut off when someone hurled forward, holding a wand up to his neck. But it wasn't Draco who had moved, or even the hot-headed Theo. Instead, it was Pansy, whose lips were curled with an anger that rivalled his.

"I dare you to finish your sentence," she

hissed, digging the tip of the wand against his skin. "Try it. I promise that you'll be hexed into oblivion by three Slytherins who would do anything to defend Draco's honour."

Draco almost laughed at the sliver of fear in Ron's eyes. "Pansy," he shook his head subtly at his friend and she reluctantly withdrew her wand, still glaring daggers at Ron. Then Draco stepped towards Ron, ignoring the way the other D.A. members all stiffened, some of them raising their wands defensively.

"Weasel," he dragged the syllables out belligerently, smirking at the way Ron's began to lose his temper all over again. Really, it was too fucking easy. "I need a

word with you. In private," he turned and pointed at Harry, whose eyes widened. "And you too."

Ron's eyes narrowed, his hands fisted by his side. "If you're going to kill us - "

"If I wanted to, you would be dead by now."

"Harry," Ron nudged his best friend, aggravated when Harry didn't say a word. "You can't be seriously considering it!"

Harry seemed to falter, but when Draco looked at him pointedly, his eyes widened as he suddenly realised what it was about. "Ron, I think we should. There's far too many people here and this is really important."

"I'll even take Malfoy's wand," Ginny

offered. She turned to Draco, who rolled his eyes and placed the wand in her hands.

Ron, however, didn't look convinced.
"But - "

"It's okay, Ron," Hermione's interjection surprised all of them. She stared at him softly and nodded. "Draco won't hurt you. You know that I'll never forgive him if he does. I punched him once and I can definitely give a repeat of that performance if necessary. Right, Draco?" She turned to the blonde wizard, who mumbled some sort of vague agreement in return.

Ron seemed to marginally relax at her words, his eyes crinkling at the corners in faint nostalgia as he recalled that

incident. But then Harry was tugging him towards the balcony where Draco had headed off to, and there was no time to reminisce about the past anymore.

The moment Harry and Ron were outside, Draco held up a hand towards the door. "Colloportus." The doors swung shut, and he wordlessly cast a muffling charm on it, before raising an eyebrow at the other two. "Don't even think about hitting me in the back with a spell just because I'm wandless."

Ron scowled. "What the hell do you want, Ferret?"

"Glad to see we're still so chummy, but I see you're dying to stuff your face with food as usual so I'll get right to the point."

He paused, looking intently at Ron, who suddenly seemed somewhat nervous. Harry was deathly silent, the expression on his face anxious.

"Three years ago, right after the Dark Lord won the battle, Hermione Granger was hit by a spell and fell off Potter's broom," Draco said, in his calmest voice, before going in for the kill. "Did you or did you not use Obliviate on her?"

40 | obliviate

4 0
o b l i v i a t e

Erases memory.

Ron stuttered.

And while Draco normally took pleasure in watching the Weasel squirm, he felt nothing along those lines now. Harry's eyes were wide and he looked thoroughly taken aback by the unexpectedness of Draco's question.

"I - " Ron seemed unable to find the right words to say. "It's not - I mean..."

Draco narrowed his eyes at him. "You know I could easily use Legilimency on you to find out the truth."

"Merlin, you're such a bloody prick!"

"Then answer my question," Draco shot back mildly.

"Malfoy," Harry intervened, looking rather uncomfortable now. "Stop pushing him. Ron wouldn't do such a thing, right, mate?"

But the moment he met Ron's gaze, the redhead instantly broke down. "Fine, I did it!" He blurted, sounding truly distressed now, his face the same shade of red that his hair was. "It was me, alright? I was the one who used

Obliviate on Hermione!"

And there it was.

The silence that ensued after Ron's confession was riddled with taut, excruciating tension. Draco was practically digging his nails into his palms to prevent himself from punching Ron square in the face, even though that option seemed highly desirable at the moment. But he had agreed not to hurt Ron. Sodding Malfoy-name and their bloody code of honour.

"You what?" Harry was the first to break the silence.

"I used Obliviate on Hermione," Ron muttered, looking rather shamefaced now. "I was some distance away when I saw her fall off your broom, and I saw

her being caught by one of the Death-Eaters far below - "

"Wait," Draco interrupted him bluntly, his posture suddenly rigid at the prospect of new information. "Who was the Death-Eater?"

"Like I can remember - "

"Think, Weasel!"

A frown etched itself on Ron's forehead as he tried to remember. "Male, definitely...blonde - not your father," he added, when Draco visibly flinched, "I would remember your bloody father anywhere. Wasn't your father."

"Good enough," Draco nodded. He wasn't entirely sure, based on Ron's sparse description, but he had a faint inkling it was Yaxley, with his hard,

blunt features and blond hair that was perpetually tied back. "Carry on."

Ron scowled at Draco's order. "So, yeah, I saw Hermione being captured and I tried to chase after the Death-Eater, I really did. But when I couldn't catch up, I just erased her memories."

"I don't understand," Harry shook his head slowly, looking at Ron with faint hostility, as if he couldn't recognise his friend anymore. "Why, Ron? Why would you do that?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No." Draco couldn't help it. It was almost in his nature to be a prick to the Weasel, even though he could vaguely guess the reason for Ron erasing Hermione's memories. It had to be the

same reason that Pansy and Blaise erased the memories of some of the Order members some months ago.

"I panicked, alright?" Ron sighed, passing a frustrated hand through his hair. "I panicked, and I figured if Hermione didn't know anything, maybe she wouldn't be tortured for information. So even if they used Legilimency on her, they wouldn't find out a thing - "

"Hold on a second," Draco's voice was sharp, and he stared at Ron intently. "Did you Obliviate her memories to save her or to save yourself and the rest of the bloody Order?"

The beat of hesitation from Ron's end was answer enough.

The blood was pounding in Draco's ears

and a feral growl ripped past his throat as he lunged forward; ready to pummel the bloody Weasel to the ground. There wasn't any semblance of rationality left; just pure, avenging fury coursing through his veins, the same kind he felt whenever he faced his father after the war.

But then Harry had reached over, clamping his hands down firmly on Draco's shoulders to drag him away. "Malfoy, you promised Hermione you wouldn't do anything!" Harry warned, when Draco tried to push him away. "Let's just talk this through."

"Fucking fine." Draco roughly shrugged him away. He glared daggers at Ron, who was looking sufficiently frightened, even though his posture was tense as

though bracing himself for a fight.

"Ron," Harry sighed wearily, clearly finding it difficult to manage two entirely volatile people. "Please explain yourself."

Ron nodded, looking more subdued now. "It was for both of those reasons. I already said that I didn't want Hermione to be tortured for information, but Obliviating her memories would prevent You-Know-Who from finding out anything about the Order. I kept the Order safe - do you even know how many more of us would be killed if You-Know-Who had found out our hideouts?" Harry looked rather unsure now. "Well, it does make sense," he conceded at last, albeit reluctantly, before glancing at

Draco. "Ron was just doing it for the greater good."

"Yes - except he did a shite job at it," Draco said coldly, throwing a frosty look at Ron. "You don't use Obliviate unless you are fully confident in it, Weasel. You erased her memories so poorly that if the Death-Eaters used Legilimency on her, they could still recover some parts of her memory. But it wasn't fucking good enough for them, so they used the Cruciatus curse on her."

Ron went white. "What?"

"It's true, Ron," Harry sighed. "Andromeda told me that Hermione was constantly tortured for the past three years."

"I - I didn't realise! I thought I was

keeping her safe, I - " and when Ron's eyes began to glisten, Draco felt a faint pang of sympathy for him. A faint one, mingled with disgust because it was honestly uncomfortable to watch his nemesis cry.

"We all make mistakes, Weasel," Draco said flatly. "But since your purpose of Obliviating Hermione's memories was to make her forget everything about the Order, you can't possibly get angry or hold a grudge against her for forgetting everything about it, or forgetting everything about you."

"Did she? Did she really forget about me?" There was something so infinitely broken and distraught in Ron's voice that Draco found himself unable to think of a

snarky reply.

"Not completely," he said instead.

But when Ron's eyes flickered with a newfound surge of hope, Draco hastily dragged his eyes away and unlocked the doors, striding out of the balcony without a backward glance. It was just a flicker of hope - but he wasn't sure if Ginny was right about Ron no longer having feelings for Hermione; or if, with the new revelation, Ron now thought they could start over.

He didn't know, but Merlin, the thought of the latter possibility fucking hurt.

Hermione was having a most tedious evening. After Draco, Harry and Ron had left, Ginny had dragged her across the room and proceeded to introduce her to the rest of the D.A. Hermione remembered some faces, like the Patil twins, Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, but the rest were all a blur to her.

She was in the middle of a group huddle and feeling terribly claustrophobic when Theo had barged his way through the group. "You're all sickening her with your over-affectionate behaviour," was his more than blunt remark, "so kindly back off."

Hermione could barely keep her face

straight as he extracted her from the crowd, and the moment she was safely away from her old friends, she threw a grateful arm around Theo, pulling him into a brief hug. "Thank you, I really did think I was about to suffocate in there."

"I know. Why you Gryffindors thrive so much on affectionate behaviour I'll never know."

"I do believe some of them were from the other houses too. I mean, there's Terry and Padma over there and they're from Ravenclaw. Oh, and Ernie and Hannah are from Hufflepuff."

Theo began to look truly nauseous. And he proceeded to spend the rest of the night next to Hermione, an arrangement which suited her just fine. The two of

them sat near Pansy and Blaise, who were thrilled to be reunited with their fellow Slytherins, Tracey and Daphne. But Hermione wasn't blind to the way the rest of the D.A. members ignored the three Slytherins. She caught the suspicious looks in between the polite smiles. Only Neville and Luna seemed hardly bothered and eventually came to sit with them. Luna's strange anecdotes about magical creatures was more than sufficient to entertain, while Neville surprised them when he asked if he could join them on their next mission. "Are you sure, Longbottom?" Theo stared at him dubiously. "With a surname like yours, you're bound to get mocked by Draco and me twenty-four seven."

Hermione rolled her eyes and elbowed Theo. "Don't listen to him. It would be great to have you, Neville."

"Thanks, Hermione," Neville looked pleased, "it'd be great to be on the team." But when Neville and Luna left to get more food, Theo turned to Hermione. "We're not actually going to let him into 17-65, are we?"

"We'll see." Hermione replied honestly, "I do think Neville's a good sort and we can trust him, but Draco and the others should have a say in this too."

Theo was appeased by her answer, which wasn't a surprise because Hermione knew that he held Draco in high regard. Despite what Draco said about the five of them having an equal

share in 17-65, the truth was that Theo, Blaise and Pansy would follow Draco's commands to the ends of the earth. Hermione thought that their loyalty was very admirable.

She was about to continue talking to Theo when the doors of the balcony were suddenly flung open. Draco strode out, his jaw clenched and grey eyes stormy. His eyes swept the room once, as though in search for someone - her; and when he finally found her across the room, he looked almost relieved. But then Ginny went up to return him his wand. Hermione watched as his posture grew rigid, and he murmured a quick answer to Ginny's question before heading out of the room altogether.

That was Hermione's cue. Pushing her chair back, she hastily waved a quick goodbye to the D.A. members before running out. Draco was already halfway down the stairs, and her chest tightened as she saw him. He cut a forlorn figure as he leaned against the banisters, head tilted down and shoulders hunched.

"Draco!"

His head snapped up at her voice, and his eyebrows rose in faint amusement.

"Merlin, Granger, you didn't need to come after me. Nor did the rest of you," he added.

Hermione looked over her shoulder, only to realise that the three Slytherins and Luna were also descending the stairs behind her, concerned expressions on

their faces. She smiled at them before turning back to Draco. "We just wanted to make sure you're okay."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but a sharp, familiar voice cut through the hallway.

"Malfoy!" Ron was rushing out of the room, while Harry and Ginny trailed after him in clear concern, both looking rather apologetic. Ron came to a pause in front of Hermione and smiled warmly.

"Hey, Hermione. Sorry about earlier."

Hermione managed a light smile and shook her head. "It's alright, Ron."

He hesitated, looking like he wanted to say something more to her before changing his mind and turning to Draco instead. "Look, Malfoy, there's

something I have to discuss with you. In private," he added, disregarding the hostile looks from the other Slytherins.

Draco's eyes flickered over to Hermione before reluctantly dragging back to Ron. "Fine," he muttered, jerking his head to a small alcove some way off.

Ron followed without another word. Draco cast a quick Muffliato the moment they were out of earshot; well aware that Hermione and the others were still openly staring in blatant curiosity. "What do you want, Weasel?"

Ron glared, but seemed to think twice before starting another heated argument. "Listen - don't tell Hermione about what we discussed earlier."

"I'm currently thinking of seventy-seven -

no, seventy-eight - different ways to hex you right now, so before I do, you'd better come up with a fucking brilliant explanation."

"You're such a wank - "

"Seventy-nine."

"I would like to explain everything to Hermione at my own time, alright?" Ron snapped in frustration, "I want to properly apologise for what I did. I owe her at least this much."

Draco bit down hard on his tongue to prevent another scathing retort. "Fine," he muttered at last, before taking a step closer to the Weasel, practically sneering down at him. "But if you somehow manage to turn the tables on her and fault her for not being able to

remember you, I will hex you with those eighty ways I just thought of."

"You said seventy-nine earlier."

"What can I say? I'm fucking imaginative."

He turned to leave, but Ron stopped him.

"Just tell me one thing, Malfoy." The look on Ron's face was serious. "How much does she mean to you?"

"Everything."

The answer came in a heartbeat, no hesitations, no extraneous thoughts required. It stunned Ron into speechlessness, but even then, Draco thought that his answer had not sufficed. 'Everything' was just a quantifier, but when it came to Hermione Granger, there were simply no words to describe

how he truly felt about her.

Having breakfast with Andromeda was one of Hermione's favourite things to do. Even though Draco's insomnia had lessened marginally, he still slept at erratic hours. The three Slytherins usually slept in late, while Luna occasionally had to run errands for the Order. But Hermione was a morning person - even though her hair often looked like a 'rat's nest' (Draco's kind words) in the morning - and she enjoyed making breakfast with Andromeda,

feeding Teddy and watching Grus the house-elf with fascination.

Hermione found Andromeda incredibly easy to talk to, which wasn't much of a surprise, since Harry had told her that she used to get along wonderfully with Andromeda's daughter, Nymphadora, as well. Andromeda was the only one apart from Draco who seemed to fully understand her and Hermione treated the older woman like her own mother.

She couldn't help it; the feeling was far too familiar, and she couldn't remember her own mother. Or her own father. She'd asked Draco about it before, but he'd never met her own parents, let alone know what had happened to them.

It was Andromeda who had the answer.

Hermione had put off asking about her parents for as long as she could, because a part of her was terrified to know the truth. If something had happened to them - she couldn't bear to know.

But now Hermione was ready to know, and Andromeda was more than ready to tell her. "Harry told me that you used Obliviate on them," Andromeda explained, as the two of them nursed hot mugs of tea at the table that morning. "You erased all their memories of you." Hermione felt her breath catch. A faint wave of sadness surged through her, but more than anything, she thought it was poetic justice - that she'd erased their memories and now she couldn't remember anything about them.

"Are they safe?" She asked, blinking away the tears that sprung to her eyes. She couldn't remember them, but they were her family and it somehow felt like she was missing a piece.

Andromeda reached across the table to take Hermione's hands. "After Harry told me that, I sent Grus to search for them. You know how clever elves are; they can apparate anywhere in the world. We found them in Australia - their names are now Wendell and Monica Wilkins. I send Grus to check up on them on a monthly basis, and yes, they are safe."

Safe. At a time like this, that was the only thing that mattered.

Hermione sighed in relief, a tiny smile flitting across her lips as she looked

over at Grus. Andromeda treated the house-elf with nothing but respect, and Grus was now seated at the table, hastily turning Teddy's face back to its original shape when the little Metamorphmagus produced a duck-bill shaped mouth.

Hermione laughed at Teddy's antics and held out a hand to the house-elf. "Thank you, Grus," she murmured, her smile widening when the house-elf slipped his hand through hers. "I really appreciate your efforts."

"Grus is happy to help," the house-elf responded cheerfully, before panicking again when Teddy hiccupped and produced a mop of vibrant violet curls. Hermione thought it was adorable how much the house-elf cared for Teddy.

Andromeda had told her that Grus was a freed house-elf, but he was entirely committed to serving Andromeda and Teddy.

"What will you do about your parents, Hermione?" Andromeda asked now, bringing Hermione back to the topic of conversation.

The brunette witch shrugged. "I do love them," she hummed in agreement, a thoughtful frown slipping onto her face. "And I do want them to be safe. But if Wendell and Monica Wilkins are happy being who they are, then who am I to destroy their happiness by presenting to them a daughter who can't remember them at all?"

"Hermione," Andromeda's eyes softened

in understanding, "your parents will love you regardless. It didn't stop Draco, it doesn't stop me - and it would never stop them."

Hermione smiled through the blur of tears in her eyes and nodded. She opened her mouth to reply, but a sudden knock on the door made the two of them turn around.

"I'll get it," she told the older witch, and quickly headed out of the kitchen. But the person standing on the front porch made her eyes widen in surprise. "Ron?"

"Hi, 'Mione," the redhead scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "Morning."

Hermione smiled in amusement, but a part of her felt almost nervous to see him. Harry had immediately set her at

ease, but Ron's fiery temper had more than alarmed her the previous night and she couldn't help but sense the tension between them. "It's great to see you, Ron," she said instead, and opened the door wider. "Come in."

Ron stepped inside, running a hand through his hair as he glanced around the place. "Um," he cleared his throat, "you live here with Andromeda?"

"Yes. But Draco and the others live here too. So does Luna."

"Luna?" He chuckled and shook his head, following her into the kitchen. "Merlin, it's a bloody full house. I can see why Ginny and Harry like to come here often. Hi, Andromeda," he greeted, nodding politely at the older witch, who

was still seated at the table.

Andromeda smiled, and rose to pour him a cup of tea. "You're invited to come here anytime you like, Ronald. Although Theo and Draco might take some getting used to."

"I highly doubt it," Ron muttered under his breath, taking a sip from the mug that Andromeda handed to him. He turned to Hermione, who was now laughing and sponging kisses against Teddy's cheek as she murmured to the little boy. "Listen, Hermione, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"I should go," Andromeda said, tactfully drawing away from the table and picking up Teddy along the way. "Hermione, tell Draco that I'll be visiting McGonagall."

Come along, Grus."

The house-elf obediently trailed after Andromeda. The moment the three of them were out of sight, Ron turned to Hermione. She was scratching at an arbitrary spot on the table almost apprehensively, but her eyes flickered to his when he said her name.

"So, um," and Ron suddenly found himself at a loss for words. Looking at Hermione Granger now and knowing what he did to her sent a pang of guilt through his chest, followed by a painful realisation that he was probably never going to make it up to her. "How've you been?" He asked instead.

Hermione smiled in evident relief, glad that he wasn't going to blow his top off

again. "I've been doing well. It's been great staying here. What about you?"

Ron looked rather thrown off by her cordial but faint detachment. "I'm good. Been fighting a lot, with Neville and the rest of the Order, mostly, but - " He stopped abruptly, exhaling in slight frustration. "Okay, this is killing me so I have to ask - are things always going to be this awkward between us?"

She was startled. "Merlin, no! But it'll definitely take some getting used to. I was the same way with Harry when I first met him, but we're getting to know each other all over again."

"So that's it then," Ron said sadly, "we're never going to be the same way we once were?"

"We will be, eventually."

"I don't think so."

"You are being incredibly pessimistic, Ronald Weasley," Hermione said, glaring at him half-heartedly. "Now stop looking so glum and drink your tea. Do you want some breakfast?"

Ron glanced up at her words, a crooked smile flashing across his face. "Now this sounds rather familiar."

"What is?"

"You. Ordering me around."

"I used to order you around?" Hermione repeated, raising an eyebrow in disbelief as she cracked two eggs onto the frying pan. She never used a wand to cook, despite the many cooking spells that Andromeda had taught her,

preferring to do it the Muggle way instead.

"You used to order everyone around. Merlin, 'Mione, you were bossy as anything."

Hermione huffed in indignation. "Well, I'm not bossy now," she said defensively, handing him a buttery scone, which he eagerly grabbed as though he hadn't seen food in days.

"You used to nag at me for everything - 'Ronald, will you stop eating so much?' 'Ronald, it's LeviOsa, not LevioSAR!' 'Ronald, will you stop lazing around and do some bloody homework?'" He imitated in a high-pitched voice, spraying food all around as he spoke with his mouth full.

She eyed him with an equal mix of disgust and amusement. "Oh, now I know where I've seen this nasty eating habit before," she shook her head, picking a crumb off her shirt and flicking it back at him. "I thought Theo was bad enough but look at you!"

"Please," drawled a familiar voice behind them. "I have wonderful table manners."

Theo strolled into the kitchen, reaching over to muss Hermione's already wild mop of curls, before sneering at Ron. His sneer was, of course, in no way half as good as Draco's, but it came close. "By the way, Red, you left this on the bathroom sink," Theo deposited a silver-coloured stone in front of her. "At least,

I'm presuming you were the last person to use the bathroom since the place reeked of your shampoo."

Ron went rigid, his blue eyes wide as he stared at the stone. "Where did you get this?"

"Not that it's any of your business - but I just said the bloody bathroom."

"No, how did you find it?"

The expression on Ron's face was suddenly hostile, almost edgy as he stared at Theo suspiciously, and Hermione immediately reached across the table. "Ron, I can explain - "

"I knew this was too good to be true!" He sprung to his feet, grabbing the stone and shoving past Theo. "I knew that there was something odd about the

situation - four Death-Eaters keeping a member of the Order with them for months!"

"Ronald, wait!"

"Shacklebolt needs to know about this, and so does the rest of the Order - "

But his words were cut off when Theo gripped the sleeve of Ron's shirt and roughly pulled him back. "You're not going to tell anyone about this," Theo hissed, looking well and truly angry now. "Because you have no right to. Whatever that is, it belongs to Hermione."

Ron's eyes flashed and he shoved Theo back violently. "It belongs to Harry!"

"Yes, well, the bloody Cloak of Invisibility also belongs to Harry bloody

Potter, but we're not going to give that back either!"

"Theo!" Hermione's eyes grew round as Ron suddenly looked downright furious. She knew that Theo hadn't meant to give that away, and that he didn't realise that this Stone was the second of the Deathly Hallows. But judging by the expression on Ron's face, it was clear that he knew exactly what they were.

"You have the Cloak too?" Ron exploded.

She opened her mouth to correct him but there came a furious knock on the door and she paused. Both Theo and Ron, however, didn't seem to hear and looked like they were moments away from hexing the hell out of each other.

"Of course we have the bloody - "

"Theo, stop it," Hermione gripped him by the arm firmly and pulled him back.

"Go answer the door."

"But - "

"The door, Theo." Her voice was firm and unwavering. "Now."

He swore under his breath and stormed over to the door, yanking it open. Ginny was a flurry of red hair and flashing eyes as she rushed in, heading straight for her brother. Harry and Neville trooped in; looking rather awed by Ginny's temper that easily rivalled Ron's.

"You!" She sounded thoroughly angry, reaching up to smack Ron firmly on the head. "You said you were going for a tactical meeting with Neville! Neville

came to visit Harry and me this morning and told us you never even showed up! I told you, if you wanted to visit Hermione, you have to bring me along!"

"I don't need a bloody chaperone, Ginny! Everything was going fine with me and Hermione until I found out that these Death-Eaters have the Resurrection Stone and the Cloak of Invisibility!"

Ron's words stunned his sister and the others into silence, and even Theo looked surprised that the stone was actually the second of the Deathly Hallows. But the tension was quickly heightened when Luna, Pansy and Blaise rushed down the stairs.

"Merlin," Blaise's eyes widened as he looked at everyone. "What's going on?"

Draco followed, sauntering down the stairs at a slower pace, running an aggravated hand through his blond hair as he surveyed the scene in the living room with exaggerated weariness. "You'd better have a reasonable explanation for waking me up at seven in the bloody morning, Weasel."

"I have a bloody reasonable explanation, you traitor!" Ron hissed, grabbing his wand and shooting a stinging hex straight at Draco.

Draco, who was wandless and completely taken unaware, barely had time to block the hex with his bare hands. He swore when the spell sliced a thin welt across his arm and the look on his face darkened. "Try that again,

wanker."

"With pleasure," Ron growled, raising his wand threateningly, even as Blaise, Pansy and Theo stepped up next to Draco to block any more of Ron's hexes.

"Is it true?" Harry's calm voice cut in before anyone else could say anything. There was a look of suspicion on his face, and he had his wand with him too.

"You have two of the Deathly Hallows?"

"If that's the case, we need to give this back to Shacklebolt," Neville interjected.

"We've had dozens of things stolen from the Order over the past few months," Ron said, with a heated glare. "Harry lost his Cloak, Shacklebolt lost his safe and now you have the Resurrection

Stone! What the hell are you playing at, Malfoy? You and your cronies say you've defected but you're stealing things from the Order!"

"You didn't give back the box of Dark Potions either," Harry hedged. "I think you owe us an explanation, at the very least."

Draco's gaze flickered to Hermione. There were some things that only the four Slytherins and Hermione knew about - one being the existence of the Peverells, a group within the Dark Lord's inner circle that was searching for the Deathly Hallows. This, above all, was Hermione's secret, and since the reason for her capture was something that she chose to share with a select few,

Draco realised that he was in no position to tell the Weasel and the others.

"I can't tell you anything," he said, at last. "You're just going to have to trust us."

Ron's mouth fell open in anger. "Are you bloody serious?"

"He's serious, Ron," Hermione said now, stepping in front of Draco in case Ron shot another stinging hex at him. "Yes, it's true - we're keeping two of the Deathly Hallows with us. But we're perfectly capable of keeping the Deathly Hallows safe and making sure it doesn't fall into the wrong hands."

Harry stared at her intently. "What aren't you telling us, Hermione?"

"Too many things," she said simply. "Draco and the others have their own methods of ending this war and they've been doing it for three years now. And I trust them," she added, and felt Draco's hand surreptitiously gloss the small of her back as silent encouragement.

Ron's mouth fell open. "Have they Imperiused you?" He shook his head. "Whatever, Neville, let's get the Cloak and head back to Shackbolt. He needs to know about this."

"If you want to take it, you're going to have to take it by fucking force," Theo spat, now truly riled up, pointing his wand at Ron. Pansy and Blaise did the same. "Because we're not giving it up."

"Trust me, Nott, I will." Ron said, as

Neville reluctantly stepped up next to him. "You forget that Neville and I have been fighting people like you for years, even if it's two against four."

"Five," Luna stepped up next to Theo, holding out her wand, a cheerful smile curving on her face, the only one unperturbed in this situation. "I trust them."

"Six." Ginny took a step closer to the Slytherins, shrugging when Ron glared at her. "Malfoy saved me twice. I don't entirely trust him but he hasn't sold us out yet."

"It'll be too late by the time he actually does, Ginny."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," she replied evenly, before looking over at

her boyfriend, who looked thoroughly torn between the two sides. "Harry?"

Harry faltered. "I - um..."

"The Cloak belongs to Granger," Draco said flatly. "Theo and I found an Imperiused Death-Eater stealing it some months ago and we took it. I killed him after that, and Granger's been using the Cloak for missions. The Stone was found the day we went to The Ruins, and I gave that to Granger as well because it would be safest with her. She's the one with the two Deathly Hallows, and the four of us Death-Eaters would do anything to protect her. Does that answer make you happy, Potter?"

"It's a start," Harry had a faint smile curving his lips and he looked at Ron.

"It's Hermione, mate, we can trust her."
Ron was silent for a long moment. Then he shook his head, shoving the Resurrection Stone into his pocket. "It's not Hermione I don't trust - it's him," he said, with a pointed look at Draco, and strode towards the door. "I'm out of here."

The door slammed shut behind him, leaving a pained silence in his wake.

41 | riddikulus

41

r i d d i k u l u s

Gets rid of boggarts.

The knock came in the middle of the night.

Draco, who awoke at the slightest sound, was the first one up. Hermione raced down the stairs after him, followed by Andromeda who seemed fraught with worry. Draco pulled open the door, holding his wand protectively in front of him, but quickly lowered it when he saw

the person standing on the front porch. Hermione peeked out behind Draco. "Professor?"

"Minerva," Andromeda greeted, pulling the door open to usher the old witch in. "Is anything the matter?"

McGonagall swept into the living room, but she politely refused the chair that Hermione offered her. She turned to Draco, a grave expression on her face. "Neville's missing," she informed him bluntly, amidst horrified gasps from Andromeda and Hermione. "I need you and your team to locate him. There's been a siege in one of our other bases and the rest of the Order's trying to save whoever they can. Seamus told us that he last saw Neville in the Forest of Dean,

so that's where he probably is."

"Probably captured by Snatchers," Draco muttered, looking almost composed in the face of such a situation. He yawned and ran a hand through his hair, leaning back against the armchair. "There's a Snatcher camp there."

"Mr Malfoy - "

"Lighten up, Professor," he drawled, his lips curling up in a tired smirk, "it's no wonder I had such a shite time in school, considering your sense of humour - or lack thereof."

Andromeda frowned. "Draco!"

"It's quite alright, Andromeda," McGonagall returned evenly. "I'm quite used to Mr Malfoy and his snarky mannerisms, considering I had the

misfortune to have him in several of my classes back at Hogwarts."

"Pleasure's all mine, Professor."

She shot him an unamused look. "Now I really don't have time for such nonsense, Mr Malfoy. Gather your team and find Neville."

"Fine," Draco rolled his eyes and nudged Hermione, who immediately ran up the stairs without another word. Luna was the first to appear, and Draco turned to her. "Get Potter and the Weaselette."

Luna nodded, and paused at the sight of McGonagall, her lips lifting in a blissful smile. "Oh, hello, Professor," she greeted cordially, before apparating off.

McGonagall's eyebrows shot up. "Potter? Harry Potter?"

"Well, you know," Draco shrugged.
"Keep your friends close, enemies closer - "

"How in Merlin's name did you get Harry Potter to fight in the war, let alone join your team?"

"I Imperiused him, of course - " Draco trailed off when Andromeda shot him a warning look, and the sardonic smirk on his face quickly faded as he added, more seriously now, "he joined for Hermione."

"Well," McGonagall shook her head in disbelief, but her features softened as she looked at Draco. "Whatever the case, Mr Malfoy, I would like to thank you. There are still some of us who think the world of Harry and would like to see

him finish what he started."

Draco suddenly felt rather uncomfortable with the gratitude lacing McGonagall's voice. "I don't think much of Potter - in fact, I still think he's a bloody wank - " he bit the words off when Andromeda elbowed him, and met McGonagall's gaze squarely. " - but I do think that Potter's the Chosen One."

"Not Longbottom?"

"Longbottom got himself lost in a bloody forest in the middle of the night, while Potter's in bed with his girlfriend. I think it's pretty obvious which of them possesses the brains and self-preservation to destroy the Dark Lord."

McGonagall's lips twitched. But before she could say anything more, Theo came

rushing down the stairs, looking thoroughly energetic and alert, despite the fact that his hair was sticking up every which way. Then Blaise and Pansy followed, mumbling polite but awkward greetings to McGonagall.

Draco glanced round the room. "Where's Granger?"

"Here," something brushed up against him, and then Hermione was pulling the Cloak of Invisibility off herself, stuffing it into her satchel. She grinned up at him and pushed herself on the tips of her toes to press her lips against his.

"Might want to look away, Professor," Blaise chuckled when McGonagall's eyes widened.

But Hermione kept the kiss brief. She

quickly pulled back, placing his wand in his hands. "This is yours," and she handed out four phials to each of the Slytherins. "And you guys forgot about these."

"Numbing potions," Draco said casually, when McGonagall frowned at the way the four of them downed the liquids without batting an eyelid. Realisation flickered in her eyes as she quickly deciphered the purpose, but even though her eyes narrowed in disapproval, she wisely chose not to say a word.

Faint pops of apparition sounded behind them as Harry, Ginny and Luna appeared. "Professor?" Harry was thoroughly surprised to see McGonagall. "What're you doing here?"

"I came to deliver a new mission to Draco." The Gryffindor head stepped up to him with a smile on her face. "It's good to see you again, Potter."

"You too, Professor."

Harry exchanged a quick hug with the older witch, and Ginny did the same. McGonagall left after that, along with Andromeda who had offered to provide medical help, and then it was just the eight of them.

Draco felt the weight of their expectant stares on him and quickly wracked his brains for a plan. After a few seconds, he came up with one. It was slipshod, but it would have to do. "We'll split into two groups," he said calmly. "Zabini, Parkinson, Nott, Lovegood - the four of

you, you start from the east of the Forest and make your way through. There's a Snatcher camp, Parkinson, you know where it is, right?"

Pansy nodded.

"Okay, you'll lead the way, see if they've got Longbottom tied up at the camp. The four of us," he gestured to the remaining members, "we'll start from the west and try to locate Longbottom. It's dark out, so it's not really necessary to use Disillusionment charms, but keep your eyes open and ears peeled at all times."

The others nodded. Theo was the first to apparate off, and the rest quickly followed, Hermione latching on to Ginny as she side-along apparated with the girl. But Pansy lingered behind. Draco

raised an eyebrow. "Why aren't you going?"

"I'm about to," she strode into the kitchen and grabbed another bottle of numbing potion from the shelf, downing its contents in one gulp. "Maybe tonight I'll have my revenge," she added, her eyes gleaming with a strange sort of excitement of the deviant kind.

"Pansy," Draco's voice was quiet. She looked at him. "Don't underestimate him."

A fleeting glimpse of hurt crossed her eyes. And all at once, Draco felt pulled back into the past, watching as Pansy slowly deteriorated into a shell of herself, terrified into such a magnified scale that she could barely breathe, let

alone survive.

"I did once," she whispered, and she dragged in a deep breath, gripping her wand tight. "Never again."

Draco found Hermione, Ginny and Harry already waiting for him by the time he apparated into the Forest of Dean. Ginny and Harry turned to leave, but he stopped them. "One second." He murmured incantations under his breath and placed a charm on Harry, before doing the same to Ginny. "Let's go. Lumos."

He led the way with his lit wand, and Hermione smiled at her friends, who

were staring after him with matching expressions of confusion. "It's an anti-disarming charm," she explained. "That way, no one can take your wand from you."

"That's actually pretty clever," Ginny remarked, grinning when Draco threw her a glance over his shoulder. "Don't look so surprised, Malfoy. I can be nice too."

"Don't break the trend, Weaselette. Weasleys are never nice to Malfoys, and vice versa."

"Malfoys are never nice to anyone," Harry deadpanned.

"That is actually very accurate, Potter. Perhaps you possess more brain cells than the previous one cell I assumed you

had."

"You just proved my point - "

"Shut up for a second, Potter." Draco stopped the group, pushing Hermione behind him instinctively. "Nox." The light from his wand flickered off and the four of them hid behind a tree, Draco scanning their surroundings with sharp eyes.

"See anything?" Ginny whispered after awhile. "Because I don't - "

Draco swore under his breath and shushed her. "I hear something." He pointed his wand in an arbitrary direction. "Homenum Revelio."

Instantly, the soft shimmer of magic in the distance seemed to evaporate, and Hermione's eyes widened as she saw a

figure some distance away, struggling against the ropes that bound him to a tree. "That's Neville!" Harry and Ginny started to head forward but she quickly stopped them. "Don't - there might be a trap."

"Stay here," Draco murmured, pulling back from them and apparating away. Moments later, the three of them watched as a flock of conjured birds flew out from behind a tree far away. The birds shot past Neville but they were completely unharmed.

"It should be fine now - " the words had just left Ginny's mouth when a sudden pop sounded behind them.

The first thing that came to Hermione's mind was that this wasn't Draco. This

apparition sound was far too loud, too clumsy. Her fear escalated in a split second when she saw the Snatcher advance towards them.

Harry was the first to react, striking the Death-Eater before the man could even lift his wand. "Stupefy!" The man was flung back with the strong spell, and collapsed on the ground, completely unconscious.

But just as the Snatcher was taken down, two more apparated nearby - one on the left and the other on the right. And Hermione was reacting without even having to think. "Protego!" The shield momentarily protected the three of them, but the Snatcher on the left was ready the moment the spell's effects ended, and he

reacted far quicker than any of them could.

"Crucio!"

Hermione shoved Ginny behind her just as the spell hit her square in the chest, and then there was excruciating pain as she crumpled up onto the ground, like hot knives digging into her skin, a feeling she was far too familiar with.

"Hermione!" Ginny turned her wand on the man angrily. "Expelliarmus!"

The wand flew out from the Snatcher's hand, and then Hermione saw someone apparate next to the man. The look on Draco's face was murderous, and his wand was pointed at the man's throat in the blink of an eye. "Avada - "

"Draco," Hermione rasped weakly, and

he quickly glanced over at her, the coldness in his grey eyes fading away when she shook her head.

He stilled, then dragged his hand up to the man's throat, preventing him from saying a word. "Legilimens," he said instead, so smoothly it seemed like he had done this a million times before. And Hermione supposed he had. After Draco had extracted the man's memories, he drew a quick tiny circle with his wand. "Obliviate."

Then with a wordless spell, the man's eyes fell shut as he slumped onto the ground, unconscious. Harry stepped up, having taken down the other Snatcher with a succession of stunning spells, and helped Draco to pull Hermione to her

feet. The four of them headed some way off, hiding behind a thicket of bushes.

"Hermione." Draco was by her side in an instant, looping his arms tightly around her waist when she leaned heavily into him. There was an almost frantic desperation in his eyes as he murmured a healing incantation to soothe the ache in her chest.

"I'm fine," she assured him, as the pain began to ebb away. She hugged him back briefly, feeling the terror in her heart quickly dissipate at the sight of him.

"Let's go."

"You're not going anywhere. Weaselette, take Granger back home, and Potter, apparate to the other end of the forest. I think Zabini and the others might need

reinforcements."

"I'm not going back!" Hermione glared at him. "I'm fine, Draco, I'll just take a numbing potion and I'll be fine! Blaise needs help and I have to go."

His eyes narrowed. "No fucking way - "

"If you drag me home, I'll just apparate here again."

"You don't fucking know how to apparate, Granger."

"Then I'll get Grus to apparate me. Or I'll travel on foot all the way to the forest."

"Okay, are the both of you going to just stand here arguing?" Ginny rolled her eyes. "I mean, while this does bring back fond memories of the two of you bickering your way through the years

back at Hogwarts, we're kind of in a situation here, and it isn't safe."

"I'm half expecting Hermione to punch him in the face at any moment now," Harry chuckled.

Hermione laughed and looked up at Draco, whose lips were twitching in reluctant amusement. "Fine," he muttered, with a resigned sigh. "Just stick close to Potter and Weaselette. And use the Cloak if necessary."

Her smile widened and she pressed her lips to his briefly, feeling a delicious shiver gloss her spine when he boldly kissed her back. "I adore you," she mused, elbowing Harry when he made a gagging noise beside her.

"You should go," Draco said quietly,

brushing his thumb against her cheek gently before pulling back. "Before more Death-Eaters come."

"Don't worry, Malfoy, I'll keep her safe," Harry said, as Hermione looped her arm through his and Ginny's, in preparation for side-along apparition.

"Please, Harry, I'm perfectly capable of keeping myself safe," came Hermione's dry retort before the three of them apparated out of sight.

Draco stared at the empty spot in the middle of the forest where Hermione had been just mere seconds ago. It seemed that Hermione had taken all the light away when she vanished, and now the night grew colder, the shadows grew darker, and the war was finally the way

it had always been.

It had been war from the moment they apparated into the forest.

Theo was the first to spot some Snatchers nearby, far away from the actual campsite. They were patrolling the place in small groups, hardly aware of the presence of three defected Death-Eaters and one Order member nearby.

They were defenceless, and it would be so easy to destroy all of them. With Fiendfyre, maybe. Except none of them knew how to control one - apart from Draco, who practically loathed that spell with every fibre of his being, after

having lost a friend to it years ago.

"What should we do?" Luna asked Blaise, who was always second-in-command whenever Draco was not around.

"They have Neville," Blaise quickly deduced. "The Snatchers are patrolling, so it obviously means that they're expecting the Order to show up on a rescue mission. Let's just take down whoever we can. Thin out the herd. Don't go near the campsite, or we'll be outnumbered. Pansy, you and I will use Legilimency to find out where Neville is."

The four of them quickly dispersed to hide among the tall trees. A trio of Snatchers soon came their way, and

Theo was the first to react. "Stupefy!" The red light hit one of them and the man promptly collapsed. But the sound was enough to alert two other Snatchers, who immediately headed over to investigate. Blaise peeked out from his hiding position to glare at Theo, who was always thrived on making as much noise as possible.

Theo grinned, and raised his wand, sending another spell right towards Blaise. The spell missed him by mere inches, honing in on the Snatcher who was a good distance away. When the man fell over, Blaise rolled his eyes at Theo, who winked. "Saved your life." "Bloody show-off," Blaise muttered and whirled around to stun the other Snatcher

on his own. He knew that Theo enjoyed the thrill of being back on the battlefield again and, to a certain extent, Blaise felt the same way. It was fun fighting alongside his friends, and now it made sense because they were fighting on the Order's side.

The next group of Snatchers were close enough, and Theo and Blaise quickly took two down in rapid succession. The third was hit by Pansy with a similar stunning spell, but the last, who was niftier on his feet, managed to escape the barrage of spells by ducking and twisting his way through.

Then Luna caught him with an unexpected spell that hardly any of them ever used. "Levicorpus!"

The man was immediately lifted in mid-air, his body dangling upside-down. Theo took the opportunity to hit him with a spell. "Expulso!" The man was blasted backwards by an overwhelming surge of pressure and fell to the ground in a heap. Theo grinned at Luna. "Good work."

She smiled, evidently pleased by his compliment, and returned back to her hiding spot. The four of them held their ground for the next few minutes, the three Slytherins being well-trained fighters and Luna being relatively skilled at duelling. But as more and more Snatchers began to converge, Blaise quickly called for a retreat.

"Neville's on the other side of the forest," he told them, after having used

Legitimacy on several of the fallen Snatchers. The four of them were now running through the woods, Theo sending blasting spells every so often to deter the Snatchers from catching up with them. "The other group will find Neville," Blaise continued, pausing as he waited for Theo to help Luna over a log. "In the meantime, we'll just keep the Snatchers at bay until we're outnumbered."

"What about the camp?" Pansy asked unexpectedly. She had been silent all this while, looking unusually focused on her mission. Blaise could vaguely guess the reason, but he hadn't wanted to call her out on it.

"We can't possibly take it down without getting ourselves killed - "

"Well." Pansy came to an abrupt halt now, a look of vicious intent on her face. She pulled back, untangling her fingers from Blaise and glanced at him briefly with apology in her eyes. "One of us has to try."

And before any of them could stop her, she apparated out of sight.

The other end of the forest was deathly silent.

Draco kept his ears peeled for any abnormalities, but after hearing nothing for a good thirty seconds, he cast a Disillusionment charm on himself and slowly made his way towards Neville.

On his trek over, he dragged up the sleeve of his jacket, grimacing at the amount of blood trickling down his arm. "Tergeo," he mumbled, clearing off some of the crimson with a wave of his wand, and pulled his sleeve back down. His Dark Mark had been bleeding for awhile now, but while the pain was excruciating, he'd been able to ward off the worst of it with the numbing potion he'd taken earlier. Now he was just hoping to get through this mission without losing too much blood.

Once Draco was close enough, he removed the Disillusionment charm and smirked at the astonished look on Neville's face. "Evening, Longbottom," he deadpanned.

"Ma - Malfoy?"

"I do believe that's my surname, yes."

"What're you doing here?"

Draco shot him an aggravated look and started to lift the magical charms on the ropes that trapped Neville to the tree.

"Midnight stroll, apparently," he said sardonically. "The forest is fucking lovely at night."

"Are you alone - "

"I think I heard a rabbit somewhere in the distance."

" - because I thought I heard Ginny scream earlier."

"Yeah, Weaselette was eaten by the rabbit."

"Are you and your team on a mission?"

Draco finally lifted his head and tapped

his wand to Neville's throat. "Longbottom, I have a hex that will make your surname become a reality. And I will not hesitate to use it if you say one more bloody word."

Neville promptly shut his mouth with an audible click. And Draco continued to work on the charms in silence that, unfortunately, didn't last long enough.

"Are you and Hermione really together?"

"For fuck's sake," Draco swore, getting ready to hex the hell out of Neville, when a sudden rustle near them made him pause, killer senses alert.

"Honestly, it's weird enough as it is - "

But Neville was abruptly cut off when Draco spun around, shooting a wordless spell in an arbitrary direction. Seconds

later, a Snatcher collapsed mere feet away from them. Draco threw the Gryffindor a frosty look. "Now will you shut up?"

Neville clamped his mouth shut and nodded. He watched as Draco swiftly moved towards the Snatcher, taking away the man's wand before leaning down, murmuring some spells under his breath that were far too soft to catch. But just then, a sudden pop sounded nearby, signalling another apparition. Draco promptly vanished and Neville stilled.

"Don't say a word," Draco's voice was suddenly far closer, and Neville realised that he'd used a Disillusionment charm again. " And try to survive."

Neville felt an invisible person place a

wand in his hands. Then the magical charms on the ropes were slowly being lifted again as the rope began to slacken around him. But it wasn't loose enough for him to escape when the next Snatcher appeared, and then Neville was twisting his hands up in a vain attempt to protect himself.

He didn't need to. Draco was far quicker to react and their enemy was promptly hit by a silent spell, one strong enough to knock him out completely.

But things went downhill from there. Snatchers began apparating around in swift succession, and Neville braced himself as he suddenly saw several of them. Draco swore under his breath and quickly blocked the first spell shot at

them with a shield charm.

"Lift your own damn charms," he hissed at Neville, blocking the barrage of hexes that the Snatchers shot their way. It wouldn't be difficult at all to get rid of them, but Draco found himself having to protect Neville, who was proving to be absolutely useless in this situation.

"I'm trying!" But the charms were complex and Neville had no idea how to go about them. Draco muttered a string of profanities as one of the hexes caught him, and Neville's eyes widened. "Are you okay?"

"Brilliant." Draco finally sent one of the Snatchers to his unfortunate fate with a strong stunning spell, only to have two more apparate some way off and make

their way over.

"I can't undo these charms!" Neville twisted and barely managed to dodge two wayward spells from the left.

"We're getting outnumbered here!" He braced himself when he saw the Snatcher to his right point a wand at him. Someone suddenly apparated next to them, a rush of vibrant red-hair and flashing blue eyes. "Stupefy!" The Snatcher collapsed, and Ron took position in front of Neville.

"What're you doing here, Weasel?" Draco asked in lazy amusement.

"Same reason you are - saving Neville," Ron rolled his eyes, sending another hex at the nearest Snatcher. "I knew it was you. Only a bloody Death-Eater can fend

off so many Dark Spells at once."

"It's flattering how well you know me, Weasel. Confringo!" Draco sent a massive blast that hit several people at once, giving them a brief moment of reprieve as Ron fended off the rest of the Snatchers. "Now cover us, I have to help the bloody useless fool here."

Neville frowned. "Hey!"

"You might want to get rid of your bloody Disillusionment charm, Malfoy, I might hit you by accident. Or not," Ron added, with a wicked grin.

"Don't delude yourself into thinking you can, Weasel." Draco lifted the last charm and pointed the wand at the rope, ready to shred it to bits. "Diffindo."

"Incendio."

The spell flew out from Pansy's wand and, in the blink of an eye, the whole tent had burst into flames. The flames were fierce and overwhelming, and she watched in satisfaction as the fire licked across the canopy and devoured everything in sight. And, amidst the yells and screams of the Snatchers nearby, Pansy turned and apparated off with a faint crack.

She landed somewhere farther away, a distance safe enough and she drew back, placing her hand against a tall tree as she looked at the hell she'd unleashed. Then there was a rustling noise nearby, and

when she whirled around, she found herself face to face with her greatest nightmare.

"You."

Fenrir Greyback flashed a wicked grin that showed a jagged row of pointed teeth and she felt her toes curl. She didn't have heightened senses at the moment but he practically reeked of blood. "Yes, it's me." He took a step closer to her, but Pansy held her ground. "I could smell you from a mile away."

"That makes two of us." She kept her eyes on the wand in his hand, feeling the blood pounding in her ears and her heart hammering in her chest. I have nothing to lose, she thought to herself, the words racing in her mind over and over again. I

have nothing to lose.

"Surely, you're not still holding a grudge about what happened, girly?" His lips widened and he shook his head. "That happened so long ago, and you have come so far since - "

"Crucio!" The word had slipped past her lips before she even realised. The anger finally erupted from within until she was nothing but seething, her peripherals blurred with the red of revenge, and she advanced towards him.

"You're no match for me, Parkinson," he laughed as the spell hit him so weakly he didn't even flinch. "You of all people should know better than that - "

"Shut up! Crucio!"

He evaded the spell again. Her eyes

blurred with tears as she dragged in another painful breath, hammering a barrage of spells in between a flurry of words. "I hate you - Crucio! - you ruined my life," she spat, twisting around when he shot another spell back at her. "Crucio! Stop backing away, you bloody mutt! Crucio!"

Greyback blocked all the spells with alarming efficiency, a mocking smile on his face as he sneered at her. "You're not very good at the Cruciatus. Don't want to hurt me too much, do you - "

"Incarcerous!"

He was a split second too slow to deflect the spell. And then there were thick black ropes looping around his huge frame, tighter and tighter, like a

python about to squeeze the life out of its prey. Pansy dragged him over, twisted the wand away from his grotesque hands, snapped it into two and dropped the broken pieces onto the forest floor.

"You're wrong," she said calmly, her voice emotionless as she stared down at him. "I do want to hurt you. I have spent years thinking of what it will be like to have you at my mercy, begging for your pathetic, measly life and screaming in pain."

But Greyback stared back at her, his dark eyes gleaming. "Go ahead. But when you're torturing me, I'll be thinking of your screams - "

"Shut up."

" - that night I bit you and turned you into

the monster that you are - "

She froze, digging the tip of her wand into his throat, watching as his skin cracked and a trickle of blood seeped from the wound. "I'm not a monster - "

" - because monsters create monsters in their own image, and there you are, beautiful, the best monster I've created in all my years, just as lethal as I am, just as capable of inflicting the kind of pain only the darkest of minds can master - "

"Shut up," her chest was tightening painfully now, and his voice was all she could hear. "Stop talking, stop talking, stop talking - "

And Greyback's smile was widening. " - just as capable of killing..."

"Avada Kedavra."

A flash of green light hit Greyback square in the chest. His head dropped back to the ground, eyes bottomless pits that stared vacantly up at the moonlight. Fenrir Greyback was dead.

But Pansy hadn't killed him.

She whirled around, her breath catching in her throat when she saw Blaise standing mere feet away from her. The expression on his face was impassive, a kind of stone cold glaze she hadn't seen from him before.

Then he blinked and lowered his wand. "I know you wanted to have the satisfaction of torturing and killing him," Blaise said quietly. "But he was never worth the effort. And certainly not worth you adding more red to your ledger."

Pansy smiled faintly, taking a step closer to him. "And your ledger?" She asked, thinking about how he had never taken a life voluntarily. Even in his years as a Death-Eater, the number of people Blaise had killed could easily be counted.

He met her gaze evenly. "You're worth it."

She slid her fingers through his, feeling a sense of serenity she hadn't ever felt before, slowly effacing all the pent-up feelings of rage and sadness that she'd harboured through the years. Fenrir Greyback was dead, and the biggest monster in her head was finally gone, at long last.

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s e c t u m s e m p r a

Cuts.

Draco, Neville and Ron were the last to return that night. Neville quickly excused himself, saying that he had to report back to let Shacklebolt know he was fine. After Neville apparated off, Draco headed into the kitchen to treat his wounds.

Ron followed him, begrudging respect

on his face as he surveyed Draco. "I still think you're a prick, by the way," he said. "But what you did for Neville tonight - I really appreciate that."

"Save it, Weasel, McGonagall sent us on the mission," Draco returned evenly, frowning at the way the sleeve of his jacket was matted to the dried blood on his arm. "Diffindo." The sleeve ripped itself to shreds, and he tugged it off, before stepping in front of the sink to run his arm under the tap.

"Yeah, but you could've died protecting Neville. Most of the curses those Death-Eaters used were lethal ones." Ron paused, dragging a lengthy sigh out before looking back up again. "You think I could be a part of your team?"

Draco's lips twitched. "Why, Weasel - "

"Don't be a prick about it, Malfoy."

"Force of habit." Draco smirked, reaching over to the shelf to grab several phials of blood-replenishing potions, tossing one to Ron and downing another in one gulp. "How do I know if I can trust you?" He asked, his gaze sharp and shrewd as he stared at Ron.

Ron shrugged and reached into the pocket of his jacket. Leaning over, he placed something on the kitchen counter. When he drew back, Draco saw the Resurrection Stone sitting neatly on the counter, the familiar shard of silver glinting under the dim ceiling light.

"I don't know if I can trust you either," Ron replied evenly. "But Hermione

seems to, and that's good enough for me."

Draco paused. He couldn't sworn he heard a faint rustle somewhere close, but he couldn't be entirely sure. Turning back to Ron, he gave a short nod. "Okay."

"Really?"

"Don't look so bloody hopeful, Weasel, it's not like I agreed to marry you."

"I'm already regretting this." Ron rolled his eyes and began to head out of the kitchen.

"Weasley."

Ron turned; evidently surprised by the fact that Draco had called him by his surname instead of his general diminutive nickname.

"Granger seems to think very highly of you, regardless of how much she can remember," Draco said quietly. "She'll be glad to know that you're on her side." Ron blinked. And blinked again. And blinked several more times.

"For Salazar's sake, if you fucking cry - "

"You couldn't stay nice for ten seconds? Bloody bipolar ferret." Ron scowled, glancing away and dragging the sleeve of his jacket roughly across his eyes. "See you tomorrow, Malfoy."

"Don't you dare fucking return - "

But Ron had already apparated off and Draco was left alone in the kitchen.

Or perhaps not completely alone.

He leaned back against the counter,

tilting his head as he studied the kitchen counter carefully. Crossing the kitchen in three strides, he reached out, fingers gripping tightly around the fabric that he felt just inches above the kitchen counter. He dragged the Cloak away, tossing it to the side, and Hermione blinked. She'd barely caught a glimpse of his tousled blond hair and flashing silver eyes before his lips were on hers.

Her eyes fell shut, and then he was kissing her fervently, nipping at her lips again and again and again until she could barely keep count. His fingers carded through her tangled brown locks and she heard the low, satisfied hum deep in his throat when she snapped out of her surprise and began to kiss him back

eagerly, sliding her tongue lightly against his when his lips parted.

But he was pulling back all too soon, their breaths clashing as a hairsbreadth separated them. "I'm sorry," he said, almost brokenly, and she felt her chest clench at his voice. "You have no idea how fucking sorry I am, Hermione."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up and she pulled back, lifting her palm up to rest against his bruised cheek. "What're you apologising for?"

"For the Cruciatus you took earlier. I should've been there, I shouldn't have bloody apparated off and I should've fucking killed that bastard before he - "

Now she raised her other hand to his other cheek, lifting his head so that his

gaze was locked on hers. "Draco," she said softly, "it wasn't your fault."

"But - "

"I mean it. I know you want to keep me safe and I appreciate that. I want to keep you safe too and, frankly, if I could, never let you out of my sight. I'd portkey the both of us out of here to some place far away, where nothing, no hex, no curse, no spell can ever harm us again." She reached for one of his hands, pressing a soft kiss to his knuckles, the same way she'd done so long ago, before meeting his eyes. "But it's a war. It's a war and sometimes you're going to come back with bruises and sometimes I'm going to come back with scars. Getting hurt is just an occupational hazard."

"You're throwing my words back at me." His eyes narrowed when her lips curled into a teasing smile, clearly remembering what he'd once said to her months ago.

"I am."

He was silent for a long moment. And then he exhaled, his forehead resting gently against hers as he shut his eyes. "You know I can't lose you again," he mumbled, his voice low and almost inaudible.

"Never. I'm here," she reached up to sift her fingers through his blond hair, before pressing her other palm against his chest, right above his heart, "and here," she promised, leaning forward, her lips ghosting a kiss on his. "Always."

Andromeda returned the next morning, looking equal parts exhausted and worried. Neville was with her, the dark circles around his eyes suggesting that he hadn't slept all night. Ron, on the other hand, looked refreshed and alert.

Hermione, who was an early riser, greeted them cheerfully before getting up to boil a pot of tea for them. "Is the

Order alright?" She inquired, after hugging Andromeda tightly. The older woman seemed relieved to see her, and returned the hug with equal force.

"They're fine, for the time being," said Andromeda, settling down into the chair next to Ron, while Neville took a seat opposite them. "Shacklebolt's busy recruiting as many people as he can. And Neville's due to make a public speech sometime this afternoon."

"Really, Neville?" Hermione smiled at her friend, who looked faintly embarrassed.

"Well - I'm not a fan of public speeches, but I couldn't say no."

"It's inevitable because he's the face of the Order," Andromeda explained,

reaching across the table to pat Neville's arm comfortingly. "Just read the cue cards that Arthur made for you and you'll be fine."

Hermione's ears perked up at the familiar name, and she turned to Ron. "Your father?"

Ron grinned. "Yeah, he's one of the leaders of the Order."

"How is he?"

"He's well, Hermione, he and the rest of the family. I told him that you probably wouldn't like to see too many people at once, so he and my Mum have been delaying coming over to visit."

Hermione couldn't help but sigh in relief, giving Ron a grateful nod. She did want to see the rest of the Weasleys, but it was

already difficult trying to reconnect with so many of her old friends. Harry had been easy to talk to, and she'd warmed up to Luna after all the missions they had together. But Ginny, Ron and Neville were still three jumbled puzzles that she had to sort through, seven years of forgotten friendships that she had to catch up with.

"...so will you be coming?"

Hermione looked blankly at Neville, belatedly realising that he was talking to her. She blinked. "What?"

Neville grinned. "I was asking if you wanted to come hear my speech. It's just at one of the other bases. The whole Order will be there. Harry and Ginny already agreed to go."

"I'll be going too," interjected Ron.

"Oh." Hermione faltered, wondering if she could get Draco and the other Slytherins to come along with her. "Um -"

"It'd be nice to have support. I'm very nervous in front of big crowds."

When put that way, how could she possibly say no? "Okay."

"Great," Neville's eyes lit up and he got to his feet. "I should probably get going. Have to practice in front of the mirror."

"You could practice in front of Teddy and Grus," Andromeda offered graciously.

"Oh, great, that works too." And Neville immediately went to find the two of them, with Andromeda in tow as she led

him to the sitting room. Moments later, his voice was echoing through the hallway as he delivered an enthusiastic, passionate speech to Andromeda, the toddler and the house-elf in one of the rooms.

Ron and Hermione exchanged amused looks. Then Ron sighed; his previously cheery look faltering rapidly and Hermione raised her eyebrows in concern, watching him with keen perceptiveness. "Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?" She asked.

"Actually - yes," he admitted quietly. His gaze flickered up and locked on hers. "But before you say anything, just let me get it all out, because I don't know if I'll ever have the courage to repeat myself.

Honestly, I'm just so terribly sorry about what I did - "

"Ron." She reached across the table to still his hands, where his fingers were drumming an erratic beat on the table. Smiling at his confused look, she shook her head and said, "you can tell me anything."

He took a deep breath and told her. Everything. From the moment the war was lost, to the moment he lost her. From the first spell that knocked her off the broom to the spell that knocked her life off its course. His words were interspersed with awkward coughs and shaky breaths and clammy hands as he reached over to grasp her fingers, blue eyes wide and pleading for her to

understand. His guilt was palpable, the remorse crushing and by the end of it, he was just a shaking, haggard mess struggling to breathe.

She smiled when he was done. Her eyes were teary at his confession, but there wasn't an ounce of anger as she returned his grip, fingers interweaving through his tightly. "Ron - "

"Hey, Red, what's for breakfast - "

Hermione's head snapped up. Theo had just entered the kitchen with Draco following at a more leisurely pace some distance behind him. She didn't miss the way Theo's mouth fell open in surprise, or the way Draco froze by the doorway.

"What's going on?" Theo all but demanded, his eyes quickly dipping

down to her fingers that were intertwined with Ron's. "Red, what the hell are you doing?"

"Not now, Theo," she said calmly, as Ron turned away in embarrassment. He tried to pull away from her grasp but she kept a firm hold on him. In spite of the fact that she'd forgotten Ron, she knew that he was one of the most important in her life, and therefore took precedence in a situation such as this. "Come back in fifteen minutes."

"But Red - "

"Not now, Theo, please."

Her voice gave no leeway for arguments, and Theo exited the room with an annoyed huff. She met Draco's gaze and, to her surprise, he didn't seem

angry at all - simply curious. His silver-eyed gaze sharpened, a silent look exchanged between them, and she knew all at once that he was perfectly aware of what Ron had just told her.

"Fifteen minutes," she repeated, and he nodded before leaving the kitchen. Picking up her wand, she cast a quick Muffliato before turning back to the subdued wizard sitting opposite her. "Ron - the truth is," she paused, worrying her lip lightly before she continued, "I know."

Ron's eyes flew to hers. "What?"

"I know. Well, suspected it, really, but when am I ever wrong?" She grinned impishly, before straightening her face again and pressing on. "I guessed it

when I was going through Draco's library some months ago - reading up about memory charms and such. I figured it had to be a poorly-performed Obliviate charm, only I didn't know who did it."

"Merlin, how are you not mad at me?"

She looked startled. "Am I supposed to be?"

"Preferably not. Though I wouldn't blame you if you were," he added sheepishly.

"Well, no," she mused thoughtfully, "I'm honestly not. Look, I understand why you did it. You wanted to keep me safe. I would've done it to myself too. It was the most rational solution at that point."

Ron seemed overwhelmed all of a

sudden, and he quickly ducked his head down, swallowing hard before looking back at her. "Thanks, 'Mione."

With a chuckle, she went around the table and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. With the rest of the D.A., it had been awkward - but somehow, with Ron and Harry, affectionate gestures like these were easier. "We're okay," she said, smiling when he returned the hug tightly.

After awhile, she pulled back and took a step away, but he stopped her unexpectedly. "There's something else." When she turned around to face him, he faltered for a moment before gathering his courage. "If you hadn't lost your memories - or if you had regained your

memories of me, us, sooner...do you ever think you could have - we could have..."

His sentence remained unfinished but the implications were clear. Hermione's gaze automatically drifted over to the living room, honing in on the blonde wizard who was chatting with Theo. Theo had probably made one of his witty remarks again, and she watched as an amused smirk bloomed on Draco's face, his silver eyes glinting in good humour and his posture relaxed.

"I think I know your answer," Ron said quietly, following the line of Hermione's vision. She shot him an apologetic look and he shook his head, shrugging good-naturedly. "It's alright, 'Mione, it's been three years and I'm over it. But a

subconscious part of me had always wondered, you know?"

Hermione did know. Because Draco had wondered the same thing previously, so it wasn't too far-fetched a notion. But the notion was quickly obliterated when Draco, as though sensing someone's gaze on him, randomly turned his head in their direction. His eyes locked on hers and his lips twitched in a tiny smile before he turned back to Theo.

And she realised, then, that there was no more room for what-ifs or could've-beens. All that mattered now was the present and, perhaps, the future - which, in spite of the devastating war, now glittered brighter than ever with Draco Malfoy in the spotlight.

It turned out that Draco and Theo were less than enthusiastic about going to Neville's speech. The two of them sat on the sofa later that day, Theo with a scowl on his face and arms folded stubbornly across his chest. And Draco looked like he was about to die of sheer boredom.

"Please," Hermione gave them her best

persuasive look. "Do it for me?"

"No!" Theo replied heatedly. "I don't like Longbottom. I don't like the Order. Why the hell should I suffer through hours of Longbottom gabbling away while the Order kisses his bloody feet?"

Hermione huffed, and turned to the other blond wizard, who gazed back at her insolently. Merlin, she loved him but he honestly got on her nerves sometimes.

"Draco - "

"No."

Hermione sighed and shot a helpless look at Pansy and Blaise, both of whom looked thoroughly entertained just listening in to the conversation. Luna, on the other hand, was seated on the armchair opposite, reading a book and

looking thoroughly absorbed in it.

Blaise grinned and leaned forward. "Draco, mate, it's not going to be that bad - "

"No."

"Sorry, Red. I tried."

"To be honest," Pansy said to Draco now, after Blaise leaned back in defeat, "if you go, you might change the Order's opinion about you. About us, in general - "

"No."

Pansy glared at him and gave Hermione an apologetic shrug. Hermione finally cleared her throat and got up, faux-disappointment glimmering in her eyes. "Okay, then," she said slowly, purposely avoiding Draco's suspicious gaze. "I

guess I'll just go with my dear friend Ron, who, by the way, would be more than delighted to go with me - "

"Fucking fine, I'll go!"

Draco threw her a frosty glare when she grinned in triumph, and Hermione then turned to the other wizard, who still looked absolutely unmoving. "Theo?"

"We're not in a relationship, Red, nothing you say or do will make me go with you."

"You know," Luna mused lightly, her eyes still focused on her book, "I hear the Patil twins are unattached at the moment and - "

"Let's go!" Theo exclaimed, looking marginally happier now as he rushed towards the kitchen counter to grab his

wand. "Let's go, let's go, let's go!"

"Merlin, Theo," Blaise shook his head in mirth when Theo came over to pull him and Pansy to their feet, "it's not for another hour."

"Yes, and we cannot be late! Draco, stop looking like someone pissed on your parade and get your bloody arse off the sofa! And okay, I know, Pansy, I'll take a bloody shower - ten showers, alright?"

Theo practically ran up the stairs, leaving the rest of them staring after him in equal parts amusement and disbelief.

Pansy grinned at Luna. "That was actually a pretty clever trick."

Luna blinked. "Was it? I was actually going to say that the Patil twins were unattached and had a bad case of

Wrackspurts in their ears. But I guess Theo doesn't need to know that," she added cheerfully, and calmly turned the page.

"Granger, I'm not sure how Muggle relationships work, but I'd like a breakup - assuming that's the correct term for it?"

Hermione turned to Draco, her lips

twitching in amusement as she stared up at his stoic face. After Harry and Ginny had arrived, the eight of them had headed to the other base for Neville's speech. They were now making their way towards the public square just a short distance from the base where the rest of the Order was, along with random citizens eager to aid the Order to bring an end to the war.

While Theo was ahead, looking around excitedly for the Patil twins, Draco was less than enthusiastic and lagged behind with Hermione, who was also not particularly thrilled to see the rest of the Order all at once. It was daunting, to say the least.

"That is the correct term for it,"

Hermione humoured him now, trying to keep a straight face as she walked alongside him. "And might I ask why?"

"For using the Weasel as a scare tactic. Although, I have to admit that that was a very Slytherin move," he added, after a pause.

"Well, I learnt from the best. Still want a breakup?"

"To hell with it," he shook his head. "I'm going nowhere."

She smiled. "Good."

The two of them soon caught up with the others. The Order members were welcoming Harry, Ginny and Luna with open arms. It was clear to see that Harry, despite having lost the war, was still some sort of hero in their eyes, and he

was quickly accosted by his friends. Ginny and Luna were also quickly lost within the crowd, leaving the four Slytherins and Hermione standing at the back of the square, looking rather out of place.

Draco was aware of the many suspicious glances cast their way, and he met each stare evenly with his stone-cold grey eyes. Some of the D.A. members were waving Hermione over and he nudged her. "You can go if you want to, Granger."

"Who said I wanted to go anywhere?" She returned indignantly, sounding every bit like the stubborn, fiery-tempered witch back during her Hogwarts days. "I'm staying right here with you." She

dragged his arm around her waist firmly, ignoring the blatant stares of surprise from the people around them.

"Oh, look, they're making Harry go up there." Pansy pointed to the makeshift podium up ahead, where Hagrid was pushing Harry up.

Harry's presence brought a resounding cheer to the crowd as he reluctantly took his place next to Ron, who seemed to be on guard to the right of the stage. Shacklebolt and Mundungus Fletcher were standing on opposite sides of Neville. Once the place was silent, Shacklebolt began to introduce Neville, whose face was white as a sheet.

Theo surveyed the proceedings with a mischievous grin on his face. "Do you

think it'd be entirely inappropriate if I shot Longbottom with a Tarantellegra?"

Hermione pulled Theo's hand down when he began to lift his wand. "Theo!"

"Aw, Red, you're ruining my fun," Theo whined, only to be shushed by Blaise as Neville began his speech.

Neville cleared his throat, looking out at the hundred over faces that stared expectantly back at him. He cast a Sonorous spell on his throat so that his voice was amplified across the square, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Today is a very special day," Neville began, looking more confident now. "We're gathered here for a common cause. For the past three years, we've lived in fear, wondering if each day

would be our last. But today, I say: no more hiding - "

Theo rolled his eyes. "Are my ears bleeding? Because I think - "

"Theo, shut up for a bit," Draco said, causing the others to look at him. He'd been staring up at the sky for almost half a minute now, a frown on his face and a sudden stiffness to his posture. Something was different. The air was unusually still, the perfect calm before a terrifying storm.

Blaise took out his wand, and the others quickly followed. But as Hermione reached into her satchel to make sure her Cloak was there, she noticed something that made her gasp. "Draco! Look at your Mark!"

True enough, Draco's Mark had darkened to a shade of the most sinister black. And then, mere seconds later, Draco felt a sharp, searing pain through his arm. "Fuck," he gasped, grasping onto Theo beside him. Hermione quickly gave him a numbing potion, along with a blood-replenishing one.

She frowned as the other three Slytherins hovered around him anxiously, forcing Draco to drink both of the potions. This was the third time his Mark was bleeding. The first was back at the Ruins, and the second was the night before. What triggered it?

And, suddenly, she knew.

"Merlin," her eyes widened in horror. "Draco, your Mark's a tracker!"

Realisation dawned on him in mere seconds and he quickly wrenched himself away, staggering back from the group. The other three Slytherins looked utterly confused and Blaise reached for Draco. "What's going on?"

"That Mark!" Hermione gripped Draco by the sleeve, refusing to let him go even as he pulled back from her. She turned to the others, who were staring at her in alarm. "Draco's Mark is jet black because it's still active! You-Know-Who must've found some way to reverse the spell such that it hones in on him instead. That's why Draco was the one who triggered the siren back at the Ruins, and that's why we were ambushed at the Snatcher camp last night!"

"And now I have to leave," Draco hissed, shrugging Theo away when his friend clamped a hand down on his shoulder. "If I could lead them far away from here - " but the expression on his face stilled when he felt the wind change. His gaze locked on Hermione's. "It's too late."

He drew his wand just as the first Death-Eater flew on overhead and took aim. "Stupefy!" The Death-Eater fell right off his broom, plummeting towards the crowd below.

Hermione reacted equally as quickly. "Aresto Momentum!"

The Death-Eater slowed until he tumbled to the ground, but that was sufficient for the entire crowd to explode

into pandemonium. There were shouts and screams as Hermione turned to Draco, feeling her heart hammering in her chest but waiting for him to give his orders. The other Slytherins were also calm, holding their ground amidst the chaos surrounding them.

"Get as many people as you can to the base," Draco directed, his jaw clenched as he ignored the bleeding on his forearm. "Zabini, you're in charge of making sure the base is untouched, don't let the Death-Eaters destroy that. Parkinson, lead these people towards it, fend off any Death-Eaters along the way. Hermione, get as many members of the Order to help. Theo, get on that stage and protect Longbottom."

Blaise, Pansy and Theo quickly dispersed, but Hermione lingered behind to press a quick kiss on Draco's lips. "I'll see you at Andromeda's when this is over," he whispered against her lips. "I'll be waiting," she promised, smiling at him before disappearing into the crowd.

"Head down this street and turn left,"

Pansy directed a group of people who managed to escape in time. Some of them were sobbing hysterically while others simply looked frightened. "Hurry."

One of them screamed, and Pansy whirled around, narrowly ducking the hex that a Death-Eater shot her way. "Protego Totalum!" She quickly put up a powerful shield charm, before waving the people behind her. "Go, get out of here!"

Several other people ran down the street, and she gritted her teeth, trying to hold off the Death-Eater's hexes for as long as she could. But not for long now. The shield was fading and she feared that she'd be hex if she dropped the

shield for just one second.

Then, out of nowhere, there came a powerful red light. "Stupefy!"

The Death-Eater fell to the floor, unconscious, and Pansy whipped her head around, her mouth falling open when she saw another Death-Eater standing some distance away. The Death-Eater raised their mask. "Hello, Pansy."

"Maisie?" Pansy shook her head in disbelief when the other girl grinned widely at her. "What're you doing here?"

"Saving your life, of course. I've been wanting to do that since the mission in Azkaban, when you didn't have a portkey." She replaced her mask and nodded. "Well, duty calls. Be careful,

Pansy, not all Death-Eaters are kind-hearted like me."

She apparated off without another word, and Pansy was left staring at the empty street. Someone came running up, their footfalls loud and frantic along the rocky pavement.

"Who was that?" Luna was out of breath as she stepped up next to Pansy, clearly having run quite a long distance. She looked utterly befuddled by the events that had just transpired.

Pansy just smiled. "A good Death-Eater."

The public square was by now in complete chaos. Shacklebolt and Mundungus Fletcher and many other wizards and witches from the Order were in the middle of the square, battling any Death-Eater that crossed paths with them. But the fight on the stage was just as messy, if not worse, because the Death-Eaters seemed intent on targeting Neville, who was still battling from his position on the stage, with Theo, Harry and Ron right next to him. Casting a wordless Stunning spell on a

nearby Death-Eater, Draco grabbed an abandoned broom that lay on the ground several feet away. "Hey, Weaselette," he called Ginny, who was duelling a short distance away from him ever since the fight had begun. She turned, and he tossed her the broom. "Aerial siege. Go."

"This should be fun." Ginny grinned and climbed on, taking off immediately.

Draco quickly found another abandoned broom some way off and hopped on; navigating through a flurry of activity as he flew threw the square, casting hexes at any Death-Eater in his path. He paused by the stage, throwing a blasting spell at the Death-Eater that was battling Ron.

Ron turned to Draco, who simply smirked. "Fancy fighting in mid-air, Weasel?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Ron spun round, adrenaline pumping through his veins as he raced off the stage, reaching out for a Death-Eater who flew low overhead. He reached out, grabbing onto the edge of the broom, his sudden weight causing the Death-Eater to lose balance and tumble to the ground.

Draco swerved past Ron, casting several hexes along the way. "Remember that wonderful song I composed in your honour some years ago? The one that made you lose at Quidditch?"

"I swear, Malfoy, if you sing that - "

Draco's smirk only widened. "Weasley

cannot save a thing, he cannot block a single thing - "

"I'm going to kill you, Malfoy!" Ron yelled, his face turning a worrisome shade of red, prompting several people around to look their way. Draco took off and Ron quickly followed. "Merlin, you're such a prick, even in the middle of a battle - "

"It's called having fun, Weasel."

"It's called being a bloody tosser - " but Ron swerved quickly when a hex flew his way from a nearby Death-Eater who was heading their way.

"Everte Statum." Draco threw the Death-Eater off his broom and chuckled.

"You're terrible at multi-tasking. And insulting me. What're you good at,

exactly?"

"Coming up with nicknames, Amazing Bouncing Ferret."

Draco rolled his eyes before navigating his way through to help Ginny, who was being tailed by two Death-Eaters. He took one of them down, leaving Ron to finish off the other. From this height, he could see everything perfectly - the incoming Death-Eaters, the battle below and even Hermione, weaving her way through the crowd, casting several surreptitious hexes here and there before she disappeared altogether underneath the Cloak.

"Malfoy!" Ginny waved at him from a far distance off and pointed in an arbitrary direction. Her eyes were wide

with evident fear. "Two o'clock!"

Draco and Ron turned, only to see a hoard of Death-Eaters flying in on their brooms, far too many to even count. There was Bellatrix's laughter in the far distance, although she was nowhere in sight.

Draco immediately veered off course and back towards the square. "Call for retreat, Weasel," he called over his shoulder, knowing full well when to back down when the situation called for it. He flew low through the crowd, taking down several Death-Eaters along the way as Ron yelled for a retreat behind him.

Up on the stage, Theo was still in the thick of battle beside Neville and Harry,

and Draco immediately went up to them, throwing aside the broom on the way. "Confringo!" He hurled a blasting spell straight through over Theo's shoulder, before pulling Neville out of the way. "Get back to Andromeda's now," he said, pushing the three of them down the stage and jumping off after them.

"But we can take them!" Theo seemed reluctant and turned to look back at the Death-Eaters were were merely scorched by the blast but not entirely hurt.

"No, we can't," Draco said shortly, shoving Theo away from a hex that flew near him. "Get Hermione. Get her out of here."

Theo promptly vanished into the crowd

in search for Hermione, while Draco followed Harry and Neville from a distance, ducking and dodging hexes along the way. They had almost made it out of the square when Thorfinn Rowle, one of the top Death-Eaters, appeared in front of them to block the exit.

"Never thought I'd see you again, Potter," Draco heard Rowle say, his attention focused entirely on Harry. Harry momentarily froze; ready to block the hex, but Draco knew what spell was gathering at the tip of Rowle's wand before the spell could even be uttered.

And all Draco thought at that instant was this: The Boy Who Lived cannot die.

His feet were surging forward before he could even register what he was doing

and he pushed Harry out of the way just as the spell shot out from Rowle's wand. "Sectumsempra!"

He heard the curse a split second before the pain hit him, like sharp blades slashing right across his chest, so agonising that the bleeding Mark on his arm seemed like child's play in comparison. Draco's vision blurred as he collapsed on the ground, and he heard someone - Harry, probably - shout a furious 'Stupefy!' that made Rowle fly several feet across the street, slumping down into an unconscious state.

"Malfoy!" Neville was shaking him urgently, and then Ron came running over, a broom in his hand and a concerned look on his face. "Malfoy!"

Harry knelt down next to him; staring with the same wide, horrified eyes Draco remembered seeing so many years ago. "Shit. Malfoy, just stay awake, we'll get you out of here - "

But Harry's voice soon faded out into a blur, and all Draco could think about was Hermione. Had Theo gotten to Hermione in time? Was she safe? Was she - his own thoughts faded out too, and then there was nothing but darkness.

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v u l n e r a s a n e n t u r

Counter curse to Sectumsempra.

It had taken awhile for Theo to find Hermione, since she'd been under the Cloak, but they finally met several streets down, where she was ushering a group of people towards the base, and he'd brought her back before the Death-Eaters could track them down.

Andromeda's house was nothing but pandemonium when Hermione apparated

back with Theo. Teddy was crying in the background as Grus hastily soothed him, while Neville, Pansy and Luna were in the kitchen searching through the shelves. There was a crowd surrounding the sofa, yells and shouts as a heated conversation ensued, Ginny's hysterical voice and Ron's aggravated one and Harry's calm one. Several members of the D.A. were also there, and they were all drowning each other out with their frantic input.

"What the hell - " Theo shook his head and pushed his way through, Hermione following closely behind.

And when she finally caught a glimpse of the situation, she felt the air leave her lungs. Draco was lying there, blood

soaked through his clothes, his shirt buttons left open to reveal large, slash wounds across his chest that were still bleeding freely, his face so startlingly white that he seemed dead.

Was he dead?

Hermione felt a suffocated sob leave her throat. No, he couldn't be.

"Fuck," Theo swore and pulled Hermione towards Draco. Andromeda and Blaise were mumbling incantations under their breath, their wands held out over him. "What happened?"

A babble of voices answered him all at once, but Hermione heard the words *Sectumsempra* somewhere in the mix.

"It's not working," Andromeda said at last, "I need more blood-replenishing

potion!"

"We're all out!" came Pansy's yell from the kitchen.

And then there was another flood of noise as some of the D.A. members offered to get some potions from the other bases. Two of them apparated off, just as Seamus Finnigan raced over with a bottle of Dittany. "Does this help?"

"No, that's for scarring," Neville interjected, "it wouldn't work!"

"Harry, just think!" Ginny turned to her boyfriend, who looked completely distressed, "you've seen how Snape healed him the previous time, so try to remember!"

"I would if I could! But I tried it earlier and it didn't work. I can't even remember

the incantation for it - vul-something!"

"That is bloody helpful," Theo fired back heatedly, shooting Harry a look of aggravation.

Cho Chang pushed through the group with a book in her hands. "There's no healing spell here that starts with a V."

And then something just clicked in Hermione's mind. Yes, there was a healing spell for this, and she had heard it loud and clear with her own ears before, because the healing spell was used on her.

"I know how to heal him," Hermoine said abruptly, prompting everyone to look at her. And then there was a babble of voices, several people offering their wands to her all at once, such an

overwhelming chorus of noise. Her heart was beginning to pound with the sudden influx of attention, and she felt herself shaking. Before she could spiral into another panic attack, she hastily clapped her hand over her ears. "I want everyone out!"

"But Hermione - "

"I don't think - "

"No, wait - "

"Out!" She repeated, her voice calm amidst the chaos. "Now, every single one of you, please. Only Andromeda stays behind - and you don't have to go, Grus! Stay here with Teddy. But the rest of you, please!" She glared at Theo, who seemed reluctant to move, and prodded him with her wand. The group slowly

trickled out of the front door into the porch, but Hermione quickly stopped one of them. "Harry, you can stay."

Harry returned to her side. "Hermione, I'm so sorry - "

"Vulnera Sanentur," she stated quietly, looking up at him. "Is that the spell?"

His eyes widened. "It sounds familiar - "

"Good enough." She knelt down next to Andromeda, holding her wand over Draco's wounds, staring at his motionless body and willing herself not to cry. Healing magic had always been calming for her, and it calmed her now, just the thought of healing Draco. She took a deep breath. "Vulnera Sanentur."

To her greatest relief, the blood immediately stopped flowing from the

slash wounds, but she held up a hand to stop Andromeda as the older witch started to fuss over Draco. Quietly, she repeated the spell two more times, watching as the deep gashes sealed themselves up and the remnant blood stains vanished from his pale skin.

Finally, she pulled back and nodded at Andromeda. "He's alright now."

"Thank you, Hermione." Andromeda swept away the tears on her cheeks and hugged the younger witch, before heading into the kitchen to create a new batch of potions.

"He's going to be alright, Hermione," Harry's voice was soft as he wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder. "He's going to be fine."

Hermione didn't answer him, wordlessly staring at Draco's unconscious figure instead, her fingers reaching up to lock between his motionless once. Oddly enough, her eyes were tearless but her heart felt like it was cracking at the seams, with the fissures slowly tearing apart as the brevity of what had happened to him suddenly dawned on her.

It almost felt like someone had used Sectumsempra on her own heart. And Merlin, it hurt.

"Hermione?"

The light from Andromeda's wand lit the

room in a soft, nondescript glow. Hermione climbed to her feet, pushing the stool back as she looked at the older witch standing by the doorway.

"Hermione, have you been sitting there all night?" She nodded, once. It was enough for Andromeda to frown in concern. "You should get some rest. It's not good for you to keep worrying like that."

"I can't help it," Hermione said quietly, sitting back down and summoning another chair over for Andromeda. She gazed at Draco, who was lying on the bed, feeling her heart constrict for the thousandth time over the past few hours. "He hasn't woken up. He hasn't even moved. The only way I know he's alive

is from his breathing, but even then, it's weak."

Andromeda sat down on the chair with a heavy sigh. "He's going to be fine, Hermione - "

"You don't know that," Hermione shook her head. "That's just what people say during a war. You're going to be fine. You're going to be safe. It's all going to be okay. They're all lies," she looked up, her gaze meeting Andromeda's squarely, "aren't they?"

She smiled gently. "I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be optimistic. I thought you had a little beacon of hope that never went out."

"That's the person I used to be. I've been through the worst of the war where all

hope is extinguished and the only thing left is basic survival instincts. I'm not fighting a war, 'Dromeda, I'm surviving it. And he - " Hermione's voice broke off, and she swallowed painfully, " - he's the reason I'm still surviving."

Andromeda was silent for a long time, and then her arms slowly came around Hermione. "You know he's my only family left too, right?" The older witch said softly. "There's Teddy, but Teddy's too young to even know what family means. And, of course, there's that wretched sister of mine who's so far gone I can't even call her a sister anymore. So there's just Draco, and I was just as frightened as you were earlier today."

"I know." Hermione smiled faintly at Andromeda, hugging her back tightly.

"You have me too, by the way."

"I'm glad."

The two sat in silence for a long while. Then Andromeda left the room, with a gentle reminder to get some sleep, shutting the door behind her.

Hermione didn't move for several minutes. But then, with painstaking slowness, she got into bed, tucking herself in the small space next to him. Reaching for his limp hand, she slid her fingers through his, resting her cheek gently against his shoulder. And then her eyes were no longer dry as tears seeped past her eyelids and stained his shirt.

She could practically hear his voice in

her head, his tone of dry amusement as he'd say, "Granger, you'd better bloody Scourgify this shirt once you're done snivelling into it." Through her tears, she almost smiled at the thought of that, even as the fissures of her heart widened ever so painfully.

"Draco, are you awake?" She whispered, searching his pale face for any signs of movement, if he'd somehow managed to hear her in his deep stupor - a flutter of his eyelids, perhaps, or a flush in his cheeks. But there was none. She sighed. "Of course not."

Draco awoke with a stinging soreness in

his chest and an uncomfortable dryness in his throat. He blinked, trying to recall what had happened to him. After a few seconds, it all came back in flashes. Fighting in the square. Coming face to face with that bloody Rowle on the street. Taking a Sectumsempra for saint Potter.

And Merlin, it wasn't fucking worth it. He felt like absolute shit.

Glancing down, he saw Hermione sleeping beside him, her tear-stained face taut with worry and an unconscious frown etched between her eyebrows. His fingers itched to smooth the frown away, but a more rational part of him knew that she probably hadn't gotten much sleep in the past few hours and

he'd just wake her if he did that.

Instead, he shifted, pressing his lips briefly to the crown of her head before shutting his eyes again. The uninterrupted peace wasn't for long. Moments later, there came a soft creak as the door opened slowly and a small boy popped his head in.

Teddy stared at him for a moment, his eyes wide and frightened, but then his face lit up. Draco hastily pressed a finger to his lip and Teddy nodded vigorously. "Draco!" He whisper-yelled. "You awake?"

Draco silently summoned his wand over from the bedside table, casting a wordless Muffliato on Hermione's sleeping figure before beckoning Teddy

over. The small boy scampered over, stepping up on the stool by the bed to get a better look at Draco.

"Hey, kid," Draco grinned, reaching out to grasp Teddy by the elbow firmly to steady him. "Don't wake Hermione, okay?"

"Hermione sick too?"

"No, just tired. Hand me that glass of water, Teddy."

Eagerly, with a fervent sort of concentration only seen in a young child, Teddy grabbed the glass of water from the bedside table and gave it to Draco. Draco drank without hesitation, his parched throat easing up on the discomfort bit by bit.

"Draco sick?" Teddy asked anxiously,

when Draco handed him the empty glass.
"Gramma says I can't play with Draco."
"No, we can play. Just not outside, alright?"

"Okay!" The boy stood with his hands braced on the side of the bed, staring expectantly at Draco over Hermione's wild mop of curls.

Draco wracked his brains for a bit, before an idea suddenly struck him. He reached over, tapping the tip of his wand to Teddy's shirt. Instantly, Teddy's shirt turned a bright shade of orange and the young boy laughed in fascination. "Now what colour's your hair, Teddy?"

He frowned, eyes looking up as he tried to catch a glimpse of his hair. "I dunno."
Draco tapped his wand to the empty

glass in Teddy's hands, swiftly transfiguring it into a mirror and bringing it up so that Teddy could see his own reflection. "Brown. Your hair's brown. Now try turning it to orange. Same colour as your shirt."

Teddy concentrated, staring hard at the mirror. The kid had done it several times before, even if it was unknowingly. Draco had seen Teddy sporting the same shade of white blonde that matched his own exactly, and the same mop of curls that was equally as unruly as Hermione's were. But more often than not, Teddy's hair was brown and straight like Andromeda's, which made sense because the two were almost inseparable.

So when Teddy's hair now turned a slow orange, Draco wasn't surprised. "I did, I did!" Teddy whispered excitedly.

Draco grinned. "Good job. Now try this."

Teddy's shirt turned a dark shade of green when Draco pointed his wand to it, and the boy promptly screwed up his features in blatant concentration as he stared into the mirror. He'd just successfully changed his hair colour when the door opened and Andromeda stepped in.

She blinked in evident surprise at Draco, who grinned lazily back at her, and then at her grandson. Her eyes widened to the size of saucers. "Oh, sweet Merlin." She shook her head, quickly heading towards

them. "Draco, I'm really glad you're awake now, but honestly, your Slytherin pride is taking itself to ridiculous, gravity-defying heights."

"Come on, 'Dromeda, look at him and tell me he doesn't look good in green."

"Draco, everyone and everything looks best in green to you. Don't think I haven't noticed the fact that you and Theo have been secretly changing all the bath towels and pillow-cases to green. You even turned the walls of my living room green!"

Draco simply smirked. Perhaps he and Theo weren't as surreptitious as they thought they were. Well, the green walls looked bloody fantastic with the green cushions in the living room anyway.

"Gramma, look at me!" Teddy chirped excitedly, pointing to his hair and waving the mirror at her. "I'm a Sly-Slythe-in!"

"So young, so wise," Draco said, with an evidently pleased expression on his face. "Potter-the-godfather, on the other hand, will probably have a heart attack."

"He will once he sees Teddy's hair. So will everyone else in the vicinity. And Grus will try to hang himself thinking that he wrecked Teddy." Andromeda shot him a flat look. "Change it back, please."

"Fine." Draco huffed, reaching over to take the mirror away from the boy. "Hey, Teddy, see this?" He pointed to his own head, picking a lock of his own blond hair between his fingertips. The boy

nodded. "Change your hair. We can match."

Teddy was clearly delighted by the idea and promptly began to focus on Draco's hair, changing his own to the same shade. "We match now?"

"Like a pair of heart-stopping gorgeous twins."

Andromeda looked torn between amusement and annoyance, and she rolled her eyes. "Now this is really going to give Harry a heart attack." Picking Teddy up, she leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to Draco's forehead. "Good to have you back," she said softly, sounding rather choked up now. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I'll try not to, 'Dromeda." Draco returned, quieter now, watching as Andromeda left the room with Teddy. The door shut with a click and he silently removed the muffling charm on Hermione before leaning over to set his wand down on the table.

But it rolled off the table, falling onto the ground with a sharp clatter, and Draco swore under his breath when Hermione began to stir. And then she was slowly pushing herself up, running a haphazard hand through her stubborn curls as she gazed down at him. He felt his heart clench, not because of the pain in his chest, but because she looked so damned beautiful, even with the tear-stained cheeks and dark circles under her eyes.

"Morning, Granger."

She blinked.

"Granger?"

She blinked again.

"No, this isn't a hallucination. You can kiss me if you want to find out."

The blank expression on her face immediately crumpled into one of utter relief and she passed her hands tentatively across his chest, looking at him with nothing but worry in her eyes.

"Are you alright? Does it still hurt?"

"Been better," he replied honestly, reaching up to slide his palm up her cheek. He drew her down slowly, staring at her with the kind of focus that committed every inch of her beautiful features to memory - the tremble of her

full lips, the fresh streak of tears racing down her freckled cheeks and the worried crease on her forehead.

She was leaning down to kiss him before he could, and he was more than willing to let her take the reigns on this one. She met him at the perfect angle, lips gentle but fervent on his, like she was trying to prove to herself that he was real. He shut his eyes, breathed her in, resisting the urge to groan when she pulled back reluctantly.

"I was so scared," she whispered, sounding every bit as vulnerable and broken as when he first found her so many months ago. "I thought I'd lost you -"

He cut her off by leaning up, capturing

her lips with his with a certain kind of determination to prove to her that he was real. No tongue, no teeth, just lips on lips, but it was a searing, desperate, almost bruising kind of kiss that dragged the oxygen from his lungs, but who needed oxygen when there was her, just her, and that alone was enough to suffice?

And when he finally let up, he didn't let her go far, instead keeping her firmly in place so that his lips were still brushing hers when he spoke.

"Never, Granger."

The house was still quiet when Draco

and Hermione headed downstairs. It was only half-past seven, but it was apparent that everyone else was asleep; apart from Andromeda, who was in the kitchen, and Grus and Teddy, who were outside in the garden.

Andromeda greeted them brightly when they entered the kitchen, and they gave her a full account of the previous day's events over breakfast. She didn't look surprised to hear that Draco's Mark happened to be a tracker. "Well, it makes perfect sense," she said calmly. "The Mark reeks of Dark Magic."

"Yes, but I'm a little confused," Hermione interjected, with a puzzled frown. "Why doesn't You-Know-Who just track Draco down here?"

"It might have something to do with the charms on this house. Shackbolt's laid up some basic charms, but I have made a couple of my own, and got Grus to perform some magic for added protection. House-elves have a different brand of magic altogether, as you know, and I believe it can be more powerful than ours are."

"So while I'm here, the Dark Lord can't track me down?" Draco reaffirmed, looking at Andromeda for clarification. She nodded, and a faint shade of relief flickered in his normally indifferent expression.

Hermione, on the other hand, was more than glad to know that Draco would be safe here. "House-elves are clever," she

mused, "honestly, I think they should be given wands and treated like normal human beings - "

"Oh, this is S.P.E.W. all over again!"

Came a familiar voice behind them. Luna breezed into the kitchen wearing a peculiar dress that seemed like it had been sewn together using different pieces of fabric. She grinned brightly at Draco, looking thoroughly pleased to see him awake now, and poured herself a mug of tea. "Hello, Draco, it's lovely to see that pink flush of health on your cheeks again - "

"Pink what of what on my fucking what?"

Hermione blinked, looking entirely confused. "And what in Merlin's name is

SPEW?"

"It's S.P.E.W.," Luna corrected. "Short for The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, which campaigns for the rights of house-elves to be treated better and not like servants. You were the one who started it. Made a lot of badges and had an admission fee of two Sickles. But it didn't go very well, because a lot of people didn't want to join, and a lot of the elves actually liked serving their masters."

"Oh, yes, of course," Hermione said thoughtfully. "That makes sense. It would be an insult to the elves to undermine something they actually like doing."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "Are you actually admitting that you were...wrong,

Granger?"

"Not at all! I think it's a good campaign, but I might have been rather short-sighted about it."

"And where was this trait of self-introspection years ago when you called me a filthy-rich snob who cared for no one but himself?"

She simply smiled. "But you were a filthy-rich snob who cared for no one but himself."

He opened his mouth to reply, but the sudden cracks of apparition in the living room made them turn, only to see Harry rushing into the kitchen, with Ginny right behind him. He stopped short by the doorway, looking like he could hardly believe his eyes as he stared at Draco.

Draco rolled his eyes. "The words are 'good morning', Potter, and no, it's not a good morning when I have to see your face - " but his insult fell flat when Ginny threw her arms around him in a frantic, enthusiastic hug.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"If you want to thank me, Weaselette, kindly get your hands off me." Draco said flatly, shooting a desperate glance at Hermione, whose grin simply widened in evident amusement.

Ginny pulled back, a look of sheer gratitude on her face. Harry, on the other hand, was still fumbling around for the right words to say. "I really appreciate what you did, Malfoy," he said, at last, his voice choked with emotion, "I still

remember how I hit you with that same spell years ago, and now you took that same spell for me. I can't thank you enough - "

But when he took two steps closer, Draco hastily dragged his chair closer to Hermione, sneering at him with mild disgust. "Potter, if you fucking hug me or anything I swear on Salazar's grave that I'll use a Sectumsempra on you."

At his words, Harry rolled his eyes, the emotional moment clearly gone in an instant. "Okay, okay, no need for violent threats," he muttered, stepping firmly away from Draco and lifting his hand instead. "But thanks nonetheless, Malfoy. Truce?"

Draco glared at Harry's hand like it was

a particularly offensive object. "And end all our years of mutual hatred for each other? I don't think so. Granger, you shake his hand."

"Oh, this is ridiculous," Hermione gestured for Harry and Ginny to take a seat at the table. Luna quickly got up, helping Andromeda whip up a new batch of breakfast. "Let's just eat and Draco will try to pretend like he hates you all when he really doesn't."

"Actually, I really do - "

"Andromeda!" The sound of footsteps thundering down the stairs made the conversation in the kitchen cease abruptly. Moments later, Theo and Pansy burst into the kitchen with wide-eyes and horrified looks on their faces. They

didn't notice the others sitting at the table as they swarmed round Andromeda, bombarding her with a flurry of questions.

"We can't find Draco!" Theo hollered in a panic.

Pansy nodded frantically. "He's not in his bed, he's not anywhere!"

"That's because he's sitting right here," Draco drawled calmly.

Theo and Pansy whirled round. There was a beat of astonished silence, and then Pansy burst into a flood of tears as she flung her arms around his neck. "I can't believe you almost died!" She cried, amidst a lengthy bout of sniffing, "do you know how scared we all were?" "You prick!" Theo punched Draco on the

shoulder, making him flinch in pain, before hugging him tightly as well. "I will kill you myself if you ever do that again!"

Ginny surveyed the scene before her with a wicked grin. "And you thought I was the melodramatic one," she said to Draco, who threw her a frosty glare.

"Guys, lay off him," Blaise strolled into the kitchen at a leisurely pace. He quickly extracted Theo and Pansy, before giving Draco a brief clap on the back, careful not to aggravate his injuries. "Good to have you back, mate. And they're right - don't ever do that again."

"It's an occupational hazard," Draco mumbled, before returning to his

breakfast.

Hermione stared at him. She knew that he was more than stressing his chest and lungs by just being here, but he'd insisted on coming down to breakfast. But it was clear that his injuries were acting up again. The others at the table soon began to talk about the next mission, and Draco surreptitiously hid a cough behind a chorus of laughter. Hermione tapped her wand to his chest, silently mumbling an incantation for a soothing spell under his breath, and he shot her a grateful look.

He drowned out the rest of the conversation and was more than happy to excuse himself from the table after breakfast, heading upstairs to catch up on some sleep. Once he was in the

bedroom, he threw himself down on the bed, feeling his head throb with fatigue.

"Tired?" Hermione slipped into the room, shutting the door gently behind her. She looked glad to leave the riotous conversation behind too.

"Exhausted."

"Okay," she faltered. He noticed the way she looked equally as tired as he was, but hung back unsurely, looking rather reluctant to climb into bed next to him.

"Go to sleep then."

He paused. "Not without you."

"But your injuries - "

"Really, Hermione." His voice was quiet now, his silver-eyed gaze boring into hers. "Not without you."

A smile glossed her lips and she was

next to him in the blink of an eye, her bare feet pressed up against his legs and her unruly curls tickling his chin. Her breaths were a steady rhythm that lulled him in, her fingers tracing an arbitrary pattern on his shoulder.

And this time, sleep no longer eluded him.

Draco was more than annoyed to learn from Andromeda that he was to be confined to bed-rest for the next two weeks, especially when Shackbolt himself came over to assign the group with several new missions. Bed-rest seemed pointless and thoroughly

constricting at a time like this, and Draco was more than ready to voice his complaints.

But if Andromeda and the rest of the group were more than adamant about him staying at home, Hermione was far more understanding. "You didn't stop me from being a part of 17-65. And back then, the only offensive spell I knew was the knockback jinx," she added calmly one morning, when she and Draco were in the inventory sorting through phials. "So now, I'm not going to stop you from fighting if you think you're up for it."

Draco felt a rush of relief that she at least understood, but a more rational part of him knew that it was risky to join the next few missions. As it was, he

could barely last a few hours without his chest aching. He was a liability. And Draco had been on enough missions to know that liabilities were better off not being on the battlefield at all.

So instead of agreeing with her, he simply reached for a new box of phials and lined five new ones on the floor. With his wand and an intense concentration that made him momentarily forget about everything else, he cast a complicated Protean charm on the first phial, before handing it to Hermione.

"Mark that with Potter's initials," he muttered, when she looked at him questioningly. "The other five are going to need these if they want to be a part of 17-65."

A huge smile spread across her face, wide and happy enough to make him feel like he'd done the whole damn world a favour. Tucking a piece of flyaway hair behind her ear, she quickly grabbed her wand to make a tiny indentation on the phial.

And that was that. The next day, Draco called for a meeting and surprised everyone else when he set the five phials down on the coffee table, along with a scribbled incantation on a piece of paper.

Luna, who had been with the Slytherins for a long time, was thoroughly pleased to finally have a phial of her own. She quickly took hers, staring at it with abject fascination. "This'll go lovely on

my Butterbeer cork necklace," she told Hermione, with a satisfied smile.

"What're the phials for?" Neville asked, the confused expression on his face mirroring Harry's, Ginny's and Ron's perfectly.

Draco remained standing, bracing his hands on the back of the armchair that Luna and Hermione were sharing. "Protean charm," he explained blandly. "This is how we stay in contact with each other on missions. Whenever you need help, or need to pass on a message, you light your phial and the rest of us will see it."

"Oh, Hermione used to make coins for us with the same charm," Ron mused, much to her surprise. She looked at her old

friends, who all nodded in affirmation. "Except this is more complicated," Pansy interjected. "Because this charm can relay messages as well. Short ones, though."

Ginny, who had been studying the incantation on the piece of paper in silence for awhile now, looked up suddenly. "So - are you finally going to tell us what it is that 17-65 does, now that we're a part of it?"

Draco hesitated. His gaze locked on the three Slytherins sitting opposite. Pansy and Blaise were nodding at him in encouragement, while Theo made a face, but after a pointed nudge from Pansy, reluctantly gave a nod as well. Draco finally turned to Hermione, who simply

shrugged. It's all up to you, was the answer in her eyes, and she smiled.

So, over the next fifteen minutes, Draco explained to the other five about 17-65. How it began with just the four Slytherins, how Legilimency and Obliviate had been their modus operandi for three years; how many people they had killed, directly or indirectly, during the war. How there was an entire inventory filled with phials of memories belonging to people they had met at some point or other during this war. How it started with keeping the Dark Lord's army to a sizable amount and preventing him from knowing about the Order. How it evolved from there when Hermione came into the picture,

becoming a search for the Peverells instead. How it became what it was now; a group within the Order that went on one mission after another, surviving one and diving right into the next, ten different people that had finally found a common purpose - to end what seemed like an endless war.

It took Draco awhile, but when he was finally done, the other five seemed thoroughly enthralled by the revelation. They immediately launched into a tirade of questions that the other three Slytherins were more than happy to answer. It was clear that Hermione was delighted to see how enthusiastic her old friends were, and when she turned around briefly to smile at Draco, he

thought that maybe things weren't so bad after all.

There were different ways to fight a war, and he was certain that he'd picked the best one.

"Draco, are you awake?"

Hermione's voice was a whisper in the night, but he heard her anyway and opened his eyes, locking his gaze on hers. "Unfortunately," he mumbled, curling his lips in a brief smirk when she rolled her eyes. "What is it?"

She faltered, a look of hesitation slipping onto her face. "There's something that I've been wondering for

awhile now. Why're you so adamant that Harry's the Chosen One?"

He didn't answer for a moment. But then he yawned, flipping onto his back so that he was staring up at the ceiling. "Longbottom's a git, there's no way he could be the Chosen One."

"Harry lost the first time. I have full faith in him and I believe that he can win if he tried again, but you're not the kind of person who would place your bets on the underdog. Draco," Hermione shifted now, leaning up on her elbow to stare at him intently. "What are you not telling me?"

The silence stretched long and empty between them. After what seemed like forever, he turned to face her, eyes

opaque and mysterious in the dark, and slipped his hand up to brush delicately against her cheek. "Hermione," he breathed, her name a delicious drawl on the tip of his tongue, and he pressed his forehead to hers. "Listen."

He told her something that night, in hushed whispers and muffled words. She listened in silence, breath caught in her throat and lungs tight. She listened to him until he was done and she watched him until he fell back asleep, her mind was still spinning with the heady realisation that she now knew something no one else, no one else in this world, did.

"Draco?" She asked, at last, after a prolonged period of complete silence. "Are you awake?"

Silence greeted her. He wasn't. But even in his sleep, he was restless, and every now and then, his fingers would twitch or his eyebrows would knit in a troubling frown.

"I love you," she whispered, smoothing the frown away with her fingertips, before sliding her fingers through his. "Because, in spite of, and even with this revelation, still."

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4 4
l e g i l i m e n s

Allows the caster entry into victim's mind.

Blaise was the one to lead 17-65 on the next few missions. Shackbolt had given them some manageable ones this time - siphoning information from people, patrolling other bases, recruiting people to fight on the Order's side,

protecting Neville when he gave more public speeches.

Draco wasn't surprised when Hermione insisted on joining because she'd always been stubborn as hell and there was no changing her mind once she'd made her decision. So all he could do was to wait. Hear the cracks of disapparition as the rest of 17-65 left on their mission. Watch as his phials lit with arbitrary messages. Play with Teddy as the others risked their lives outside.

And Draco soon realised that there was something absolutely terrifying about waiting. There was none of what he felt out on the battlefield - the adrenaline rushing through his veins, the twisting and turning as he closely evaded Dark

spells, the mantra kill or be killed looping itself over and over in his mind. Instead, there was just silence, time ticking as each second dragged to a slow crawl, and the war seemed infinite.

When it came to waiting, there was nothing else necessary but hope. And Draco, being the ever-realistic cynic of a Slytherin that he was, had never depended on hope to win the battles for him, but he now found himself needing it more than ever, especially on those nights when Hermione didn't return.

The sleeping draughts that Andromeda forced him to take made him unable to stay awake for long, of course. So there were nights when Hermione returned, her hair still damp after a quick but

thorough bath, only to find Draco fast asleep, a perennial frown glossing his forehead every so often. She'd smooth the lines away and curl up right next to him, pressing her lips to his chest gently when his arms instinctively wrapped around her.

Other nights, the pain from his Sectumsempra wound became almost unbearable and she'd find him tossing and turning, writhing in both the physical agony of his injury and the nightmare that seemed recurring. She knew they were repeated ones because, in between the murmurs of her name - he always called her by her first name in his sleep - there were two other things he said -

The first was: "I have to kill you. Or he's

going to kill me."

And the second: "You deserve to die. I regret nothing."

She woke him up on one of the nights when his nightmares seemed worse than ever. The moment she touched his cheek, his eyes flew open and he bolted upright. He had already summoned his wand to him without her even realising, pressing the tip of it against her throat with lethal purpose. His eyes were cold, the look on his face almost feral and he seemed to be acting based on pure killer instincts alone.

Unafraid, Hermione simply smoothed the pads of her thumbs across his face. "Draco?"

He blinked, twice. And then the storm in

his eyes seemed to diffuse rapidly as they fixed on her face. "Hermione?"

"It was just a nightmare," she said calmly, "you're safe now."

Draco's face twisted into a horrified expression when he finally registered the wand against her throat. He quickly wrenched away from her, the wand falling to the ground with a clatter. "Fuck," he swallowed roughly, looking at her with searching eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head, but he kept firmly out of reach when she stretched out a hand to him.

"It's those numbing potions," he muttered, running a frantic, shaky hand through his tousled blond hair. It was the

second time she'd seen him unravelled - the first being the time she had suffered that internal injury so long ago. "When they wear off, the pain comes back in full force and it must've been some sort of trigger. Shit - "

"Draco - "

"I'm so fucking sorry, Hermione," he reached out for her, then faltered, snatching his hand back again. "You shouldn't - you should sleep somewhere else in case I - "

"Draco." She firmly closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, careful not to brush against his chest lest she aggravate his wounds even further. He instinctively leaned towards her, even though his

hands were limp beside him. "This is ridiculous. When I have my nightmares and wake up screaming and pummelling you to death, do I get you to sleep somewhere else?"

"Hermione, your hits couldn't hurt me, but I could kill - "

"You wouldn't." She said confidently, pulling back and tilting his head so that she was looking right into his eyes.

"Despite what you may think of yourself, Draco I-don't-know-your-middle-name Malfoy, you're not a monster, and I won't have you thinking otherwise."

She pressed her lips to his before he could argue. His lips were chapped and hers had a brief cut from a hex she'd accidentally taken on an earlier mission,

but she couldn't care less. She kept the kiss gentle, felt him still beneath her in surprise for a brief moment, before he dragged in a painful breath and slid his palms up to her hips, his fingers sliding onto the bare skin where her top rode up. "Seriously," she mumbled against his lips, still keeping her eyes shut and stifling a whimper when his fingers traced languid circles on her skin, trailing a scorching heat in their wake. "What's your middle name? I just realised that I have no idea what yours is."

But perhaps it was the wrong question to ask, because his fingers abruptly stilled. He pulled himself away with visible effort, and glanced away. "Lucius," he

mumbled, after a moment's pause.

"That's my middle name."

"Like your father's name?"

"Unfortunately."

She stared at him for a moment. "Your nightmares have something to do with him, don't they?" She asked perceptively. His eyes flickered back to hers in surprise and she shrugged. "You've never told me about him. Plus this," she reached for the string of phials around her neck, holding one of them up to him, "you gave this one to me because you said that this holds memories belonging to your father, and that it's the only one you haven't viewed yet."

He stared at the phial for a long moment. Then, with a resigned sigh, he lay back

down on the bed, closing his eyes briefly. Hermione didn't hesitate to curl up next to him, reaching for her wand and casting a quick soothing spell on his chest before putting it back on the bedside table. They were a hairsbreadth away from each other when he opened his eyes, and he reached across to drape an arm around her waist almost absentmindedly.

"I have two recurrent nightmares among many others," Draco said quietly. "You know how - when I first started out as a Death-Eater, I was tasked to kill Dumbledore?"

Hermione nodded. She remembered Narcissa's memories clearly, when she had made an Unbreakable Vow with

Severus Snape, remembered Draco's explanation that had followed several days later.

"That's the first. I don't think I'll ever forget that night when I disarmed him. He offered me, actually offered me help, but I was too bloody terrified to take it. And so it repeats in my dreams, I can practically hear Bellatrix's fucking laughter and Dolohov, Greyback and the others standing behind me, encouraging me to hurl my first killing curse. And I can hear his voice - Dumbledore's voice - in my head, telling me that I'm not a murderer."

Hermione looked at him curiously. "You hadn't killed anyone before that?"

"No. To be honest, I don't even

remember who my first kill was. The Dark Lord had me tortured so much after the war until I couldn't think, and when he ordered me to kill some prisoner, I just did it in a heartbeat."

"Kill or be killed, right?"

"When you're a Death-Eater - that's the only fucking way. And," Draco paused, swallowing roughly before continuing, keeping his eyes averted from hers.

"That's exactly what my bastard of a father did to my mother."

Hermione felt a jolt of shock, but her mind was rapidly whirring, trying to make sense of the puzzle pieces that were finally falling into place. "Why?"

"To save his own fucking skin," Draco's voice was a hard kind of impassive that

made her shiver. He said it so matter-of-factly that, for a moment, he sounded like a complete stranger to her. "Several days after the Dark Lord won, the Death-Eaters found my mother hiding out in one of the rooms at Malfoy Manor. Her elves had sealed the bloody place up so tightly that no one could get through. Lucius was the one that tracked her down, helped Bellatrix break through the wards, and he was also the one who shot an Avada right through her heart the second he found her. Right in front of me and everyone else."

Hermione felt tears sting the back of her eyelids as she thought about Narcissa, and how much she had loved her husband. And for Draco to have to

witness everything spiral out of control right in front of him seemed equally as heart-breaking.

"That's your nightmare?" She whispered now, wondering how he could bear even going to sleep with such a frightening memory in his head.

Draco faltered, his arm instinctively tightening around her waist. "No," Draco's voice was quiet now, so low it was almost inaudible. "My nightmare is something that happened months after. The Dark Lord sent a couple of us to fight an uprising that had started with some members of the Rebellion. At that point, I hated Lucius more than anything in the world. So when I saw him outnumbered by five other Rebellion

members, I just stayed where I was. And watched him die."

Hermione felt her breath lodge in her throat. "What?"

He flinched now, a quick, almost fleeting movement but she caught it anyway. And then his face was impassive again as he pulled his arm away from her. "Lucius deserved to die," Draco's jaw was clenched, his eyes blank as he stared up at the ceiling. "I regret nothing."

His words were exactly what he'd mumbled in his nightmare moments ago. Hermione kept silent and tried to gather her thoughts. She wondered if in the past, before her time in captivity, she might've felt some sort of deep-seated judgement or loathing towards what

Draco had done.

But now? Now she didn't see black or white, right or wrong. All she saw were the monsters in his head that Andromeda had once told her about and she wondered if there was perhaps a way for Draco to face them all. Or did he have to live in the shadows, haunted by the monsters of the past for the rest of his life?

The monster in this nightmare, the second nightmare, was not Lucius. Hermione's fingers unconsciously drifted to the phials hanging on her neck as she wondered if it was something else altogether. She could still remember Narcissa's voice from the memories she'd seen, clear as crystal -

We will never be safe and we can never run from him. I made my choice. Find Draco and keep him safe. Find Draco and protect him. Keep him safe, Lucius. No matter what the cost.

No matter what the cost.

Suddenly, the last puzzle piece fell into place, and she knew.

"Merlin," she breathed quietly, turning to look at Draco, only to realise that his gaze had already travelled to where she was gripping the phials tightly between her fingers. "Draco - "

His eyes flew up to hers, the greys in his irises almost desperate and volatile.

"Don't," he choked out, a strangled sob that had never escaped him before.

"Hermione, I know what you're going to

say. I know you've figured it out on your own. But don't say it."

"I won't," she swore, reaching up to brush her lips against his in a promise. Using her wand, she magically unhooked Draco's phial from the silver-coloured chain around her neck and pressed it into his hands. "But I believe the decision lies in your hands now."

His eyes fell shut, his jaw clenched tight in some sort of unspeakable pain, and she brushed her thumbs gently against his cheeks as she watched him fall asleep, his chest rising and falling with slow, steady, heartbroken breaths.

Fighting a war without Draco felt almost directionless. Hermione had quickly realised this when 17-65 joined the Order on its next mission. The Order functioned differently from 17-65, there was nothing surreptitious or stealth about it; it was just charging into the fray, diving straight into the thick of things, direct confrontations and wands held at point blank.

"Bloody dumb move," Theo had mused, when Shacklebolt was giving out the

orders. Hermione couldn't agree more - not that there was anything wrong with straightforward confrontations, but she thought that a little more strategic thinking might help at times.

That afternoon's mission had been a particularly gruelling one - the Order had seized back another one of its bases, but not without a few casualties along the way. Hermione had felt her stomach churn at the sight of the few dead bodies, and was suddenly glad for her memory lapse. Forgetting people had dulled her emotional attachments to them. And in a war like this, it actually worked in her favour.

After handing several healing potions to Professor Trelawney and Madam

Pomfrey, Hermione headed back to her group. Blaise had deliberately ignored Shacklebolt's command to group together earlier during the siege, and had directed 17-65 to stay along the sidelines, using Disillusionment charms to hide themselves. It had actually worked out pretty well - apart from a few minor injuries here and there, none of them were in a bad shape.

Hermione went over to Ron, who was seated some a good distance away from the group, cradling his arm possessively to his chest. Harry was with him, trying to get Ron to show him his arm, but the redhead was refusing profusely. She sat on the opposite side of Ron and nudged him. "Arm, please."

"It actually doesn't hurt that much - "

"He's terrified of healing charms," Harry explained, and rolled his eyes. "Says they hurt more than the injury itself."

"I'm not terrified. I just don't have an injury - "

"Sure you don't." Hermione said calmly and turned her wand on Ron. "Petrificus Totalus."

Harry snickered as Ron went completely rigid. "He's going to yell at you once you remove the spell on him."

"Ferula." Hermione quickly performed the necessary spell, before looking up at Ron. His eyes were flashing in annoyance and she grinned wickedly. "Maybe we shouldn't remove the spell."

"I agree." Harry hummed in approval

and stood up, dusting the grime off his hands and motioning Hermione over. "Hey, is that Hagrid calling us over there?"

Hermione caught his surreptitious wink and smiled innocently, sidling up to him as he draped his arm comfortably around her shoulders. "Why, yes, it is. We have to go now. Bye, Ron!"

"Catch you later, mate! In a few hours!"
Stifling their laughter - which probably wasn't very appropriate behaviour considering the time and place - Harry and Hermione made their way off, sneaking glances over their shoulders every so often and trying to keep a straight face as they saw Ron's still figure.

Moments later, there came an angry yell and they froze. Thanks to a kind-hearted Luna, Ron was finally released from his body-binding curse and he was now charging towards them, his face red in pent-up annoyance. He caught up with them quickly, and as she watched Ron aim a playful punch to Harry's gut and Harry twist and turn to avoid him, she felt her lips twist up in a wide smile, feeling the two biggest missing pieces within her finally falling into place.

Draco found himself standing in front of the Pensieve the next afternoon. His arms were braced on the rim and he just inhaling, exhaling, his usually alert mind blank and devoid of all thoughts. He didn't even hear the footsteps that echoed through the hallway or the door being pushed open slowly.

"Draco?" Andromeda's voice abruptly jolted him out of his reverie. "Is everything alright?"

Draco turned around, leaning back against the Pensieve as he looked at her. He suddenly noticed the weary lines around her eyes, the fading black strands

in her hair. When she wasn't smiling, Andromeda Tonks looked exactly who she was - a widow who had lost most of her family during the war.

Andromeda's gaze fell to the phial in Draco's hand. "Decided to face your monsters?"

"More like let them engulf me whole," he mumbled, running a tired hand through his hair. "I told Hermione all of it yesterday."

A light of understanding that quickly dawned on Andromeda. "Everything?"

"Everything I know. She - guessed the rest." Draco studied the phial in his hand, scraping his fingernail against the smooth surface. "Dromeda - " he looked up at his Aunt. "When you came to visit

me three years ago after learning that Lucius had died - and I told you everything, did you ever think less of me? Less than what you already thought of me?"

Andromeda seemed truly startled by his question, and she stepped closer to him. "Draco," she shook her head and smiled, "I never once thought less of you. If I did, I never would've asked you to find Hermione in the first place. Do you remember what you said when I first asked you to look for her?"

"I said yes."

"You said yes - immediately. You also said that you'd do it, if it meant redeeming yourself in some way or other. Draco, I'm not the one who thinks

little of you, nor does Hermione, or anyone else. In case you didn't notice, your three friends from Slytherin would do absolutely anything for you. And I'm certain that Harry and the others think really highly of you."

"Unlikely," Draco scoffed, but he fell silent after that.

Andromeda smiled at the thoughtful countenance on his face. "It's all in your head, Draco. If you can't fight your fears, you live with them." She gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder and turned to leave the room.

The door shut with a soft click behind her. And then Draco was alone, Lucius's phial digging into his palm as he fought to calm himself. Finding an infinitesimal

ounce of courage somewhere within himself, he reached for his wand, tapping the phial three times.

"Aparecium."

A faint but neat scrawl slowly revealed itself around the phial, a complex incantation that Draco had long ago learnt by heart, because he'd tried to open the phial dozens of times before, only to back out at the very last second.

This time, he recited all of it, every single word, right to the very end, where the incantation ended in the familiar code that Lucius had come up with. "One-seven-six-five," he mumbled, tapping his wand once more to the phial, and the catch on the lid unlocked with a tiny click.

Emptying the memories into the Pensieve, he took a deep breath and went in.

Unlike Narcissa's, the memories Lucius had sifted out for viewing were sparse, clearly bereft of all sentimental value. There were only three. The first spun Draco into a familiar room, where he was blocked by a crowd of people in

familiar masks. Knowing that he was but a mere intangible figure in a memory, Draco pushed his way through, trying to get to the front of the crowd.

"Avada Kedavra."

The voice was calm. Then there was a flash of green light and a delighted cackle.

He knew what it was before he even saw it - his mother, lying dead at the feet of Bellatrix, and his father, holding up a wand poised in mid-air, and his younger self, staring in abject horror at the scene that had just transpired. Seeing it a second time still felt like someone had launched ten Crucios right at him all at once.

"My lord," Lucius's voice was calm as

he turned to face the Dark Lord, who was watching in evident satisfaction, pleased that the traitor had died at the hands of her own husband. "As you can see, my son and I had nothing to do with Narcissa. She was a disgrace, to both the family name and to you, my lord."

"I see," the Dark Lord still didn't look convinced, and his eyes landed on Narcissa's motionless form. "Dispose of the body, Bellatrix. No traitor deserves a proper burial."

Draco watched as his younger self took a desperate step forward, but Lucius had hit young Draco with a wordless body-binding curse that made him freeze in place.

"As for you two," the Dark Lord now

turned to Lucius and young Draco, "I will cease your punishment for now. But there is still farther to go if you want to prove your loyalty to me."

"Yes, my lord," Lucius bowed.

The Dark Lord swept out then, followed by the rest of his Death-Eaters. The moment the doors were shut, Lucius cast Silencing charms on the room and turned to young Draco. "We must never speak of her again," Lucius said coldly, "your mother was a traitor and a disgrace and she was better off dead." He then dropped the Body-Binding curse on young Draco before heading out of the room.

Draco had lived this memory before. But this memory was now from a different

perspective, and he didn't waste time hearing young Draco break down, screaming himself hoarse in the silenced room. Instead, Draco followed Lucius closely, watching as the older man strode quickly down the hallway.

Lucius paused as he passed a portrait of the three of them - Draco in the portrait had a cold, indifferent look on his face that rivalled Lucius's, while Narcissa was smiling down fondly at them. And as Lucius looked at the picture, he allowed his cold features to slip for a moment.

"Forgive me," he murmured, pointing his wand at the portrait. "Evanesco."

The portrait vanished into non-existence, and Lucius walked away. Then Draco

found himself sucked into a vortex of another memory. The hallway of the Malfoy Manor was dark and isolated now as a figure headed down the hallway, lit by a single dim glow.

"Narcissa?" Lucius's face was illuminated by the light. "Narcissa, where are you?"

"Here." Draco knew at once that this was a memory prior to his mother's death. Narcissa ran up to him, her face ashen in the dim light. "Where's Draco?"

"Safe. But not for long. The Dark Lord's coming, and we have to leave now."

"No. My time is up." Narcissa said calmly. "Give me your hand. Just like you promised."

"Narcissa - "

"Please, Lucius, there's really no time." She snapped her fingers and a house-elf materialised next to her. She looked down at the creature. "You know what to do."

The elf solemnly brought out a wand, placing it over Lucius's and Narcissa's bonded hands.

"Will you, Lucius," she began, a certain deathly sort of calmness to her voice, "watch over Draco to the best of your ability, and protect him from death at the hands of the Dark Lord?"

"I will."

"And should the Dark Lord ever doubt Draco's allegiance, will you kill me when the time comes, in order to protect our son?"

Lucius visibly flinched. "Narcissa - "

"Will you?"

"I will."

Narcissa smiled, and turned to the elf.

"Seal this Vow."

The elf tapped the wand once as a brilliant red flame slid out from the wand, winding itself around their joined hands. Narcissa waved the elf away and it vanished without another word.

Turning to Lucius, she reached forward and hugged him. "Remember your promise," she whispered. "Ward this house. If all else fails, then you'll bring the Dark Lord here and finish what you swore to do." She pulled back to place something in his hands. A phial. "Give this to Draco and tell him that I love him.

I love you too. Both of you."

Lucius's reply was a muffled blur as the memory evaporated into the darkness, and then Draco found himself pulled into the next one. It was a wearier Lucius this time, sitting in his study in the Manor. He was writing at his desk, and Draco had seen enough memories to know what he had to do. Crossing the room, he leaned over the desk, peering at the letter that Lucius was composing.

To: Andromeda Tonks

By the time you receive this, my wife and I would no longer be alive. It is with great reluctance that I entrust the safety of my son, Draco Lucius Malfoy, to you.

But my wife, prior to her death, seemed to have much faith in you and I will extend the same trust, much as it may appear to be misplaced.

Enclosed in this envelope is a will citing you as Draco's sole guardian, as well as trustee of the Malfoy fortune until Draco turns twenty-one, following which he will inherit all of the funds. You will also find a sizeable amount set aside for you and your grandson - my condolences for your losses - that I hope will be sufficient to tide you through this war...

Lucius stopped writing when an elf apparated into the room, and he glanced up. "How is he?"

"Young Mister Malfoy still lives in the apartment, sir," the elf replied, "with three of his friends. He is safe. He has put up some protective charms."

"That's not good enough." Lucius frowned and stood up. "Ward up the apartment, elf. Let no other Death-Eater find it, including and especially the Dark Lord."

"Yes, sir."

The elf disappeared quickly. Lucius paused, folding up the letter and sliding it into the drawer beneath the desk. He strode out, letting the doors slam shut behind him, the lights in the room fading to black.

Hermione found Draco sitting on the front porch when she returned, with Teddy in his lap and Andromeda beside him. Leaving the others inside to discuss the success of the mission, she stepped outside. The door creaked when she opened it, and she smiled hesitantly as the three of them outside quickly turned to look at her.

"Mione," Teddy said happily, his hair turning the same shade of brown that

hers was.

Hermione swiftly went forward, scooping Teddy up in her arms. "Hello, Teddy!" She peppered several kisses across his cheeks, which made him laugh uproariously.

Smiling, Andromeda got up and took Teddy from her, only so she could hug Hermione herself. "I see the mission went well," Andromeda said pleasantly, before giving Hermione a meaningful look, darting a glance in Draco's direction surreptitiously.

Hermione nodded. So when Andromeda left, taking Teddy with her, she slowly stepped towards Draco, settling down on the step next to him. He seemed far more relaxed than he had been the day

before, but his gaze was still distant and troubled.

"You guessed right," he said, before she could even think of something suitable to say. His voice was once again the same shade of emotionless, the kind that made her want to reach out and hold him, only to be afraid of doing it at the same time. So Hermione kept her distance for him, simply waiting for him to continue speaking.

"My father's didn't kill her because he wanted to save himself," Draco said quietly. "He did it for me. She made him take an Unbreakable Vow. If he didn't fulfil it, he was going to die anyway. And it wasn't just that." Draco sounded more vehement now, bracing his arms on

his knees as he kept his eyes averted from Hermione's. "He actually had an elf put charms on our apartment - and kept it out of the Dark Lord's eye for years. And my father - "

"Draco - "

" - my stupid, bigoted, prick of a father actually wrote to ask her to look after me when he was gone. I should've known - should've known the day 'Dromeda came and asked if I needed help - "

"Draco - "

" - or the day when the Death-Eaters were trying to get a hold of the Malfoy inheritance, only to find that all the money was missing because it was with Andromeda all this time. And he even gave money to her and Teddy - "

"Draco!" Hermione reached forward, firmly gripping his face between her hands so that he was now looking at her. "Breathe. Just breathe."

He dragged in a deep, weary breath, as though it took him an immense effort to do so, and locked his gaze on hers. "I don't fucking know what to do, Hermione," he whispered, shutting his eyes briefly when she absentmindedly brushed her thumb across a faded scar on his face. "He killed my mother. I should hate him - "

"But you don't," Hermione said resolutely, when he trailed off. "In case you didn't realise, you referred to him as my father, when just last night, you were calling him Lucius - "

He shook his head. "Doesn't mean anything, Hermione."

"You're calling me Hermione," she pointed out, with a smile. "When you're teasing me, you always call me Granger. The same goes for Theo - it's Theo when you're being nice and Nott when you're mocking him."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "How did you - "

"And I also know that you call Blaise and Pansy by their surnames, because they're not as close to you as Theo is. Same goes with Harry and the rest of 17-65. It's your defence mechanism. You're afraid to let others in, so you call them by their surnames because it helps you detach yourselves from them,

emotionally. In case they hurt you. Or - and I think this is the real reason - in case you lose them."

Draco was so stunned that he simply stared at her in silence.

And she cracked a grin. "You know, that's the kind of face you used to have when I came in first and you came in second during our Hogwarts days."

His lips twitched, but he tried to look as annoyed as he could. Frankly, he didn't think he succeeded very well at all. "For fuck's sake, Granger, do you really want to start with this because we could go on forever arguing about which one of us is smarter than the other - "

Her eyes softened as she gazed up at him. "No. What I really want to say is - I

know you can't forgive your father for killing your mother. And you can't forgive yourself for letting him die. But we all make mistakes, and we just have to live with the ones we make."

Draco glanced away. "I don't know how you can bear to sit next to me and not feel disgusted by what I've done."

"In spite of, remember?" She reminded him, a smile playing on her lips. "In a war like this, there are good people who do bad things for the right reasons. Your father was one of them. And so are you."

His eyes darkened to a shade of emotion that she seldom saw from him, and he leaned in close. He was just a hairsbreadth away from her when the door opened and the sound of footsteps

interrupted them.

"Um, mate," Blaise folded his arms across his chest, looking torn between amusement and embarrassment as he stared at them, "there's something you have to see - "

Draco waved a dismissive hand at him. "Obscuro."

"That's mature," Blaise grumbled when a blindfold materialised out of nowhere and wrapped itself around his eyes, but he waited patiently all the same.

Draco turned back to Hermione, swiftly closing the gap between them to press a gentle kiss to her lips. It was over just as soon as it began, but it still sent a thrill down her spine and a delicious ache in her stomach all the same. "Thank you,"

he murmured, before reluctantly pulling away and removing the charm from Blaise.

It was easy for Hermione to deduce that Blaise had something important to say, if the grave look on his face was any indication. This time, he seemed intent on talking to Draco alone. So after excusing herself, she headed back into the house, leaving the other two outside. Draco raised an eyebrow at Blaise, who simply handed him a crumpled piece of paper.

White Wyvern, Tuesday, 7.00

Draco's head immediately snapped up.
"The Peverells?"

Blaise nodded tightly. "We were helping the Order recover a base, and I bumped into Pritchard on the way. He gave me this."

"Could be a set-up."

"He allowed me to use Legilimency on him. Not a set-up."

Draco paused. There was a sudden adrenaline rushing through his veins, a feeling that had been dormant for awhile now. It was - unlike those he had while on missions with Potter and Company.

This was different. This was the same pounding in his heart, the same dryness of his throat, the same stiffness of his spine that he had felt during all those years he'd worked as a Death-Eater.

"I'm thinking that this could be a good opportunity," Blaise continued, "you know - thin out the Dark Lord's army. We know that MacNair, Yaxley and the Carrows will be there. If we take them out, we'd have less to deal with in the future."

Draco nodded. "Worth a shot. But keep this between us."

"I don't think the two of us can stun that many Death-Eaters - "

"It's not going to be two. It's just going to be me," Draco cut him off emotionlessly.

Blaise stared at his friend for a moment. "This is a revenge mission for you, isn't it?" When Draco didn't reply, he slowly grinned. "Well, count me in. Pansy and Theo would probably want to come along too. But let's leave Potter and Company out of it; I highly doubt that revenge is their style. Let's keep it between the four of us."

"Just like old times," Draco agreed, and held the paper between his fingertips, watching the edges flutter in the wind, delicate and destructible. "Incendio."

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d i f f i n d o

Rip to shreds.

The four Slytherins were down in Knockturn Alley at seven on the dot the next morning. The streets were deserted, but Draco was keeping his eyes and ears alert for any activity nearby while the other three cast numbing and anti-disarming spells on themselves. They

were donned in Death-Eater robes and masks, two things they hadn't worn in a long time. It provided an excellent cover, because only Death-Eaters could walk around at this time of day without anyone asking questions.

Theo looked pleased as he fiddled with his Death-Eater mask, a satisfied grin on his face. "You know," he mused, "we should really parade round in these masks sometime."

Pansy's eyes were gleaming as she thought about it. "We should definitely do that. We'll probably get a scream out of Longbottom and even Potter."

"If we're lucky – even the Weasel too."

Blaise hastily hushed them as Draco turned to leave first. There wasn't much

time to lose, and Draco expecting his Mark to start bleeding any moment now. He had to get to the Peverells before the rest of the Death-Eaters showed up. Keeping his head down, he strode quickly past the closed shops and soon arrived at the White Wyvern.

The doors were locked with basic magical charms, as he'd expected, but he simply undid them and left the door open. He paused, waiting for the other three to step in before shutting the door behind them. Ignoring the rooms on the first floor, Draco climbed the stairs and walked straight to the last room down the corridor. It was the only room that was lit, a faint glow of light streaking through from beneath the ratty door.

This time, the door was locked from the inside. Behind him, Blaise, Theo and Pansy were completely silent, and he waved them back behind a pillar so that they were out of sight. He aimed his wand at the door and took a deep breath. "Reducto."

The door splintered to a million fragmented pieces, and the people inside immediately scrambled to their feet. Draco stepped in calmly, his eyes roving quickly across the group, finally putting names to the ever-elusive Peverells that had held Hermione Granger captive for three whole years.

He'd already known that Alecto and Amycus Carrow were a part of the Peverells, and so were Yaxley and

Walden MacNair.

But he felt a sudden shiver race down his spine when he saw Antonin Dolohov – who was, in his own way, equally as ruthless as Bellatrix. And, last but not least – Rabastan Lestrangle; and, by extension, a distant relative of Draco's. Ignoring the cold chill clamping in his throat, Draco was the first to break the startled silence, taking a determined step into the room. "It's been a fucking while," he drawled, his lips curling up in his signature smirk, "I've missed you all."

A sinking feeling of dread rushed through Hermione when she woke up that morning and saw that Draco's side of the bed was empty. As far as she knew, Draco was never up this early, and thanks to his injury and frequent bouts of nightmares, he usually slept in later than usual.

Dragging herself out of bed, she rushed down the stairs with a wand in hand. "Andromeda!" She burst into the kitchen, startling the older witch who had just started making breakfast.

"Dromeda, have you seen Draco?"

Andromeda's eyebrows shot up. "No, not at all. I thought he was still sleeping."

"No, he isn't!"

Without waiting for Andromeda's reply, Hermione rushed back upstairs, only to pause on the second floor when she saw one of the doors left ajar. Theo's room. Theo's door was never left open when he was sleeping. She strode towards his room, placing a palm flat against the door to push it wide open, her jaw dropping when she realised that Theo's bed was empty.

And completely unmade. But not the point.

Hermione had lived with Slytherins for long enough to know when something

was up. Theo, being the loudmouth that he was, never went anywhere without telling the whole world where he was going. And Draco always told her where he went – even if it was merely to the Black Market to restock, or to the backyard with Teddy. Draco knew that she had always harbored a fear of him not returning, and he'd always made it a point to let her know.

But not this time.

Acting on her impulses, she went over to Blaise's and Pansy's shared room, rapping sharply twice. When no one responded, she grabbed the doorknob tightly, twisting it and stepping in.

Empty.

"Luna!" Hermione's voice was frantic

now, and she was in front of the last closed door before she knew it. "Luna?" Moments later, the blonde witch had opened the door, a sleepy smile on her face. "Hello, Hermione."

"Something's happened," Hermione said quickly, trying to keep her cool. "Get dressed, get your wand, and get the others."

"What's wrong?"

"Draco, Blaise, Pansy and Theo are gone."

Luna's eyes widened, and she quickly dashed into the bathroom. Hermione ran up the stairs and did the same. It didn't take her long to freshen up and pull on a clean set of clothes, brushing her teeth while simultaneously using her wand to

bunch her stubborn hair up into a tight ponytail.

Heading back into the bedroom, Hermione quickly summoned her satchel, slinging it over her shoulder before going over to the study desk. She located the parchment – Draco had a knack of being fastidiously neat, which kind of made sense given his strict upbringing – and she held the paper carefully as she headed downstairs.

Andromeda glanced up worriedly when she stepped into the kitchen. "What happened?"

"Draco's gone," Hermione bit back the choked sob that threatened to rise in her throat and focused instead on the task at hand. "Theo, Blaise and Pansy aren't in

their rooms as well."

Andromeda's frown deepened. She watched as Hermione laid the parchment down on the dining table, smoothing the ends out gently with her fingertips. "What's that?"

"It's – a work in progress. Blaise and Draco have been working on it for a while now. It's like the Marauder's Map, charmed with the Homonculous spell, only it plots a far bigger area," Hermione explained, before tapping her wand to it.

"Specialis Revelio."

Faint ink marks gradually appeared across the map, a map that had landmarks dotted with arbitrary signs, along with footprints tracing across

every so often, each set of footprints tagged with a specific name. The number of footprints across the map was numerous, so much so that most of it was overlapping.

"You can trace people from here," Hermione continued, and Andromeda couldn't help but lean over the girl's shoulder to study it in curiosity. She practically had to squint to make sense of each label and each set of footprints. "When Draco couldn't participate in the previous few missions, he used this to track us from home and told us which places were deathtrapsthat we had to avoid."

"Where is our house on the map?"

"It's unplottable. It's just like how You-Know-Who can't track Draco here. I think it has something to do with Grus's magic.

But I believe we're somewhere here," she pointed to a specific area on the map. "I only hope that Draco and the others aren't somewhere unplottable, because it'd be impossible to find them."

"Not impossible," Andromeda suddenly reached over, pointing to a street labelled Knockturn Alley.

"There they are."

Several pops of apparition sounded at that moment, and Luna and the others rushed in mere seconds later, all of them looking equally flustered. "'Mione – "

Ron began to speak but Hermione held up a hand to stop him. The wind was knocked out of her lungs as she scanned the names in that same area.

Draco Malfoy. Walden MacNair. Theodore Nott. Alecko Carrow.

The names went on and on, the footprints all overlapping, making it impossible for her to see a particular name in its entirety. This wasn't a normal mission. They were out there battling the top Death-Eaters that had captured and kept her in captivity for the past three years. The blood rush to her ears, and all at once, it seemed like the worst of her nightmares were about to become a reality.

"Hermione?" Harry's gentle voice broke

her thoughts.

She blinked, staring back at their worried faces. She'd always been an over-thinker, but at that moment, she was quick to make a spur of the moment decision. Draco was fighting for her, and she had to help him. "Get to Knockturn Alley. Now."

Time to face her demons.

The startled silence reigned for about five blissful seconds before Dolohov had his wand aimed directly at Draco. "Malfoy," his voice was entirely cordial, which simply meant that his intentions were all the more deadly.

"Dolohov," Draco greeted pleasantly. His mind was working rapidly. He wanted nothing more than to kill every one of the six in this room, but there was something else he needed to do first.

"How've you been?"

"Don't change the subject, Malfoy," he said sharply. It was evident that Dolohov was the head of this entire fiasco, and Draco almost swore at himself for not having guessed that sooner. Just because Dolohov was in Azkaban didn't mean

that he didn't have a part to play in Hermione's capture.

"You have exactly three minutes to state your intent before the Dark Lord's army finds you. That is – if I don't kill you first."

"You wouldn't," Draco said calmly, dragging up his sleeve to expose his Dark Mark, holding it out to Dolohov.

"You're going to call the other Death-Eaters away – "

"Who the hell do you think you are, Malfoy – "

" – or I'll let the Dark Lord know that his most trusted Death-Eaters have been conspiring against him in search for the Deathly Hallows. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to know that you intend to kill

him to gain mastery of the Elder Wand." His words were met with furious silence. Yaxley, in particular, was seething and Draco purposely directed a smug wink at him.

"Understandably," Draco continued calmly, "I'm more than willing to make a fair trade. Get rid of the tracker," he paused, reaching into the pocket of his jeans and drawing out a familiar silver-coloured stone – the bait. "And I'll let you have this."

"Accio Resurrection Stone!"

Draco rolled his eyes at Amycus Carrow, the Stone still nestled perfectly in his palm. "Don't be daft, Carrow, you should know better that the Summoning charm doesn't work on this."

Dolohov laughed.

"Malfoy, you're clearly overestimating yourself if you think that you can make a successful trade with the six of us when there's just one of you – "

He stopped when there came a sudden rustling sound from behind him. And Draco's heart sank in dread as he realised that Theo had blown their cover far too soon.

"Or," Dolohov's eyes were gleaming now, "maybe there are two of you. Crucio!" He hit the invisible Theo with a strong Cruciatus, and Theo dropped to his feet with a sharp yell.

The plan was quickly falling to pieces and Draco didn't hesitate to direct his wand at the huge table in the middle of

the room.

"Expulso!"

The table flipped across the room, hitting the two Carrows and Dolohov out of the way. The rest of the Peverells scattered to avoid the blasting spell, and the diversion was sufficient time for Draco to race across the room, reaching around until he felt Theo's arm and pulled him out of the way.

"Get out of here," he hissed, deflecting a curse that Yaxley shot his way. MacNair and Rabastan were kept busy by Pansy and Blaise respectively, both of whom had revealed themselves the moment Theo was discovered.

"I'm fine," Theo muttered through gritted teeth, dragging himself off the ground

and removing the Disillusionment charm on himself, turning his wand on the Carrows, who had swiftly recovered and were now heading towards them.

"Stupefy!"

But as Draco's Mark began to burn in a searing pain, he realised that they didn't have long. The rest of the Death-Eaters were on their way, and they had to take down as many of the Peverells as they could and get the hell out of there.

But these were not usual Death-Eaters, the six of them had instincts that rivalled his own, and did not hesitate to using the Darker curses. Draco kept his eye out on his friends as he duelled. Pansy had a terrible split lip and her left arm was twisted at an unnatural angle, while

Blaise's mouth was bloodied. Keeping a good grip on Theo, who stumbled every so often, Draco fended off spells and shot back several hard-hitting ones of his own, only to have them deflected easily. When he sent a strong stinging curse that slit a brilliant welt across Dolohov's cheek, the Death-Eater swore and dragged his arm across his face before turning on him.

"Incarcerous!"

Draco, who was too busy fending off the Carrows' curses, didn't see this coming. In a flash, he felt thick ropes wind round him and he was dragged across the floor, his chest struggling to breathe against the weight of the curse.

Amidst Theo's horrified yell, he heard

Dolohov's angry voice.

"Give me the Stone, Malfoy."

"Come and get it," Draco taunted, neatly twisting out of the way as Dolohov shot three consecutive spells at him.

But the ropes were still cutting into his skin and he found himself at Yaxley's feet, a triumphant smile crossing the Death-Eater's face as he aimed his wand at Draco.

"Cru – "

"Expelliarmus!"

Everyone paused at the unfamiliar voice. And Draco's eyes widened as Neville stepped into the room, his wand calmly aimed at Yaxley. Hermione was beside him, and Draco was even more stunned when he saw Harry, Ginny, Ron and

Luna trail behind them, their wands all raised and poised to attack.

Yaxley was the first to speak, his eyes gleaming as he focused solely on Hermione.

"If it isn't our favourite little Mudblood." Hermione visibly flinched, the colour rapidly draining from her face, but she levelled him an even look.

"I-I'm not afraid of you anymore."

"Of course you're not. You're just afraid of all those nights we spent torturing you until you were nothing but a pathetic, mewling quim, begging for a morsel of food or healing potion, screaming yourself hoarse like the worthless – "

But his words were abruptly cut off when Draco, having gotten rid of the

ropes during the short period of silence, shot a spell that made him fall to his feet. "Crucio."

Yaxley's scream rang out in the horrified silence, and Draco's hands were around the man's throat in an instant, like a python ready to squeeze the life out of its prey. His vision was blurred with a fury that made him almost dizzy with adrenaline of the most toxic kind. The blood was pounding in his ears and he heard nothing else – not the horrified gasps from the others as they saw him use the Cruciatus so freely, not the flurry of hexes and spells as the fighting resumed – nothing but the choked sobs from Yaxley as the man struggled for breath.

"You sick fucking bastard," Draco hissed, his voice shaking with anger as he stared into Yaxley's terrified eyes. "I'm not even going to grant you the privilege of dying a quick, painless death because you don't fucking deserve it – "

But firm, stubborn arms were dragging him away from Yaxley in the next second. Draco saw a brief blur of Harry and Neville in his peripheral vision, prying him off a choking Yaxley.

"Malfoy, don't!" Harry shouted, "he's not worth it!"

Draco shrugged Harry off him, vicious fury still clouding his vision. He was about to hurl another curse at Yaxley when someone charged right at him,

completely knocking him to the ground. Rabastan. Then Dolohov and Amycus were joining in the scuffle, dragging Harry and Neville to the ground before either of them could even react, and Draco suddenly found the Resurrection Stone wrenched out from his pocket.

"Expulso!" Draco shot a curse at Amycus when the man pried it away.

But Amycus ducked, and the spell shot right at his sister, Alecto, behind him, who had been duelling Luna and Theo. Alecto was blasted back into the wall as Theo barely put out a shield to protect himself and Luna just in time.

"Stop him!" Draco yelled, trying to pry himself from the scuffle as the Amycus began to run out of the room. Ron, who

was battling MacNair alongside Blaise and Hermione, quickly glanced over at Draco, who signalled him towards the escaping Death-Eater.

"Get the Stone!"

"Stupefy!"

Ron shot a stunning curse at the Death-Eater, who promptly fell over. And then Ron was hurling himself at Amycus, trying to wrestle the Stone from him as Ginny rushed over to help.

Draco twisted away from Dolohov and physically dragged the man aside. "I'm not fucking around, Dolohov," he spat, gripping the Death-Eater's robes tightly. He dragged up his own sleeve and shoved the bloodied Mark in front of Dolohov's face. "Get rid of this. There

are only two people who can do it other than the Dark Lord, and one of them is you."

"I'm not going to – "

Draco dug his wand into the man's throat.

"Remove the fucking tracker or I will kill you," he seethed, noticing how the other members of 17-65 were looking at him worriedly, thoroughly frightened by his behaviour. But he was just a haze of anger now, the anger a trigger scent that had set him off, spiralling him right back into the person he used to be before he found Hermione Granger. Cold, merciless and ruthless.

Dolohov's eyes locked with his.

"You have to kill me first."

A furious growl of frustration slipped past Draco's lips as he slammed the Death-Eater against the wall. He wanted nothing more than to kill Dolohov, but he couldn't, not yet. Twisting Dolohov's wand away from his hands, Draco snapped the wand cleanly into two, dropping it onto the ground. Then he held his own wand to the man's temple.

"Legilimens."

Dolohov wasn't fast enough to keep him out, and Draco had quickly located the exact memory he was searching for. He had a few seconds of reprieve before Dolohov was pushing him out of his head, out of the labyrinth of memories. With remarkable strength, Dolohov

roughly shoved him away before disappearing on the spot.

"Fuck," Draco was infuriated at having lost the opportunity to view the counter-curse for the Dark charm that had clearly been placed on him. He had been so close to getting rid of it, the last fucking connection he had to the Dark Lord.

"Draco."

Blaise's voice snapped him out of his thoughts and he turned around. He was startled to see that the fighting behind had ceased, his friends all gathered and ready to leave. Some of them still looked frightened by what they had just witnessed, but the three Slytherins were hardly bothered, and Hermione just

stared at him with faint understanding in her eyes.

"We have to get out of here," Blaise continued calmly, "now."

"Fine." Draco glanced round at the destroyed room. Alecko Carrow was still lying in an unconscious heap, while Amycus too was knocked out cold. But Yaxley and MacNair had clearly disappeared before they could be caught, and so had Dolohov, mere seconds ago.

Then Draco noticed Rabastan Lestrangle caught under a pile of rubble. Rabastan caught sight of Draco and spat out a mouthful of blood. "You're just like your parents – a fucking disgrace," Rabastan sneered, "and now you're siding with the

fucking Mudblood – "

Draco was striding across the room before anyone could stop him, gripping Rabastan by his Death-Eater robes.

"What did you say?"

"Bellatrix was right – she always thought your parents were snivelling lapdogs. Your mother was a traitor and a worthless shit, and your father was worse, he hid behind your stupid mother and deserved to die – "

"So did your fucking brother – Rodolphus," Draco returned, fighting to keep his voice calm. His hands were clenched so tightly around Rabastan's robes that his knuckles were white. "Rodolphus was a useless shit too, just

like your parents. But you," Rabastan laughed mirthlessly, his eyes glinting in some sort of evil satisfaction as he noticed the way Draco's eyes darkened. "You take things to a whole new level. Toying with the Dark Lord, deceiving him for years, rescuing that filthy little slag after we broke her with the Cruciatus – "

"Thanks for reminding me," Draco's eyes glazed over into something entirely lethal, and his wand was at Rabastan's neck before the man could even finish his sentence.

"Avada – "

"Draco."

Hermione's voice was soft and broke the trance that he'd sunk into. After so many kills, it almost became entirely too easy. Draco's head snapped up. He glanced over at her, focused only on her, the way she shook her head and lifted her hand, holding it out for him to take.

It was the way it had always been. She was light and he was darkness; and yet, like a fumbling, ugly moth, he was constantly attracted to the light even though he knew he would forever reside in some of the shadiest corners of the dark.

Climbing to his feet, Draco crossed the room and headed towards her, only to pause when Rabastan spoke again.

"You're not even going to kill me?"
Rabastan's tone was mocking.

"Seems like living with your Mudblood
whore has made you weak."

Draco's face was impassive as he stared
at Rabastan.

"Survive this," he said quietly, and
turned his wand on Rabastan.

"Diffindo."

He grabbed Hermione's hand as the two
of them disappeared, Rabastan's shrill
screams a never-ending loop echoing in
his ears as the Death-Eater's flesh ripped
to shreds.

There was a tense silence that greeted Hermione the moment she found herself back at Andromeda's with Draco. The rest had already apparated back and for a moment, no one spoke. Hermione could see that, apart from the Slytherins and perhaps Luna, the rest of them were more than disturbed by what they had just seen.

Draco's grip on her hand was far too tight, almost desperate. He placed a brief hand on her hip to steady her in the after-effects of their side-along apparition, but once she had regained her balance, he snatched his hands off her as though her touch had scorched him. Then he was storming off, heading

up the stairs without so much as a backward glance.

Hermione wanted to follow him, but faltered when she noticed how cut up Theo and Pansy looked. Her unwavering sense of duty won eventually, and she silently went to the kitchen to put together a tray of healing potions. She heard the group talking in the background – Ron wanting to know what happened while Blaise seemed more than grateful for the help.

Ginny was still trying to wrap her head around the fact that Draco could so easily use the Unforgivables without so much as blinking, while Pansy was adamant that it was necessary at a time like this.

But when Neville suggested that the Order wouldn't like to hear about what Draco had done, Theo was on his feet in a flash, his lips curling in aggravation.

"You're not working for the Order now, are you, Longbottom?"

"Well, technically – "

"Yes, we get it, you're the new Chosen One, you're still the Order's puppet. But this mission had nothing to do with the Order. It was just plain old-fashioned revenge, Slytherin-style."

"But that's not how the side of good fights – "

"Case in point – we're not good."

Hermione hurried back to the living room, the tray of healing potions in her hands. She nudged Pansy to sit so that

she could see to the girl's bruises, while Luna did the same for Theo. As she waited for Pansy to drink one blue-coloured potion, she turned to Blaise, murmuring something into his ear. He nodded grimly and quickly pushed himself off the sofa, heading up the stairs two steps at a time. After he was gone, she turned to Neville, her voice quiet but firm when she spoke.

"Draco did it for me," she held up a hand when he began to protest.

"I'm not saying it's right. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel like doing the same myself."

"Actually," Ron interjected, the light in his eyes surprisingly understanding. "This makes sense. Don't get me wrong —

I'm not a cold, cruel wank like Malfoy," he added, unable to help himself, and grinned when Hermione shook her head at him in silent mirth. "But there are times when I'm on the field, and I'm trying to take down a Death-Eater with light hexes, but sometimes you just want them gone, you know? Not just from that battle, but – forever. So instead of a stunning hex, I sometimes find myself using hard-hitting spells."

Ginny leaned forward, a troubled frown on her face. "But when you use a Crucio, like Malfoy did earlier, you actually have to mean it, or it doesn't hurt."

So..."

"You're insinuating that Draco has a

sadistic, bloodthirsty streak in him?" Pansy deadpanned. And when Ginny flushed and nodded, Pansy simply shrugged.

"Well, yeah. What did you expect? He was practically raised by Bellatrix for the entire of his Death-Eater career."

"War brings out the worst in good people," Luna interjected, and Hermione smiled. She couldn't have phrased it better herself.

"So does love," the blonde witch added innocently, and that was when Hermione promptly blushed a brilliant shade of red.

"Gotta agree with Lovegood there," Theo grinned, clearly sensing Hermione's discomfort and revelling in

it.

"I've never seen Draco so ruthless before. I guess all is fair – and cruel and hot and animalistic – in love and war...ow!"

He swore under his breath when Hermione purposely pressed her thumb down hard on one of his bruises.

Harry, on the other hand, simply chuckled. "Did you just quote from a Muggle poet?"

"Blame Red. She quotes from all these fucking weird books that Draco gets for her from the Black Market, and most – if not all of them – are from Muggle authors."

Blaise came down the steps at that

moment and he settled back down beside Pansy, reaching forward to lay a phial on the coffee table as per Hermione's earlier request. Hermione set aside the potions for the time being and picked up the phial, studying it with a thoughtful look on her face.

"You can all view this in the Pensieve upstairs," she started quietly, "this phial contains all my memories during the three years I spent in captivity. And if you don't feel the slightest bit of that hot rush of violent anger after viewing it, then you can tell the Order what Draco did. But you will have to tell the Order every bit of what those Death-Eaters did to me, recounting every single memory in great detail."

Her eyes roved round the group. Neville looked sufficiently chastised while Ginny was subdued. Ron, on the other hand, was pale with guilt, but Hermione shook her head at him, mouthing the words 'you don't have to'. He immediately let out a sigh of relief.

"We're not telling the Order anything," Harry cut into the silence, placing a comforting hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Believe me – I've seen Hermione's memories and I felt the same way Malfoy did when I saw the Death-Eaters earlier. I just didn't act on it."

Harry's voice was cool and authoritative, and she suddenly saw why people thought him fit to lead the battle three years ago. She reached up to give

his hand a grateful squeeze and sent a warm smile in Ron's direction, glad to have the both of them on her side in this matter.

She found Draco sitting on the floor beside their bed, his elbows braced on his knees and head buried in his arms. It was his posture, perhaps, the way he cut a sorry, forlorn figure as he sat on the

stone cold ground that made her heart clench painfully.

Hermione shut the door behind her, casting muffling charms on the room and headed towards him. She reached out to touch his arm, but the moment her fingers made contact with his skin, he jerked up and pulled away, silver eyes hard and almost haunted.

"Don't."

This wasn't new. She remembered how he'd acted the same way back when he'd been forced to use the Cruciatus under You-Know-Who's orders. He was working himself into a guilt-ridden, self-loathing haze, the monsters in his head once again overwhelming every and any monster out there in the world.

Slowly, tentatively, she took another step closer to him. If he'd been a predator earlier, then he was the prey now. It was like approaching an injured, wounded animal, and she held out a hand to him, waiting for him to make the first move.

"Give me your arm."

"Hermione – "

"I could wait here all day if I have to. Your arm, Draco."

Reluctantly, he lifted his arm, and Hermione fought the urge to flinch when she saw the bloodied scratches across his Dark Mark, the inflamed skin around it and the bits of his flesh actually gouged out, like he was trying to physically rid himself of the Mark

through magic. Instead, she bit her lip and went about trying to fix his arm using the tray of medicine she'd gathered from the kitchen earlier.

But the moment she was done binding it up, he pulled away from her again. He began to pace, rapidly, disjointedly, running shaky fingers through his hair and blinking hard, as Hermione stood up and watched him unsurely.

"I can't fucking get him out," his voice sounded almost strangled when he spoke. "For years, I've been working for him. And now that I'm finally out, away from him, he still somehow manages to fucking control me."

"I know."

"His magic is literally in me."

Hermione," and his eyes flickered to hers now, desperate and pleading, "I have to get it out.

This – this fucking connection, I have to end it somehow. I would literally cut off my fucking arm if it means getting him out of my system."

"Draco, just because your Mark is active and has a special connection with You-Know-Who, it doesn't mean that you're just like him."

"Actually, I think I am. Did you even see me earlier? Fuck, Hermione, if you hadn't stopped me earlier I would've killed Rabastan without fucking blinking."

"Honestly? I wanted you to kill him."

Draco's eyes flew to hers and she smiled

softly.

"But I also know that you ruin a part of yourself when you kill. And he wasn't worth it. None of them are. Just you."

It was the closest to a verbal confession she'd ever made, but Draco outdid her when he closed the distance between them in three purposeful strides. And then his lips were crashing down on hers, rough and fervent all at once, as he eased her back against the wall, her feet stumbling with his swift action but his hands on her hips were there to balance her if she ever fell. His tongue was the kind of luscious hot velvet when he prodded through the seam of her lips, kissing her so thoroughly she could barely breathe.

To hell with oxygen, Hermione thought briefly, she didn't need it – and she eagerly kissed him back, reaching up to loop her arms around his neck to tug him closer, carding her fingers through his soft blond hair. A low groan wrenched itself from his throat when she nipped daringly at his bottom lip, and then he was dragging his lips away, freckling a kiss on her chin, sponging several across her jawline, sweeping down the column of her throat, until he found her pulse point.

This is how you know I'm alive, the thought scarred itself across her mind. She brazenly pressed her body against him; her hips flush against his, her breath hitching when she found him hard and

wanting. And this, she thought, a satisfied smile curving her lips when he momentarily shuttered, his head dropping on her shoulder as he let out a guttural growl, this is how I know you're alive.

His tongue scorched her when he laved over her skin and then her mind wasn't empty, no, it was racing when he began a delicious combination of licking, sucking and nipping on the same spot; and Hermione let out several breathy moans and whimpers when he did the same after shifting to a spot higher on her neck, then another just below her ear. Then he drew back slightly, his breaths still hot and unsteady, his fingers equally as hot and unsteady as they dug into her

hips. "I love you," he whispered, "don't ask me how or when, don't even say it back, just know that I really fucking do – love you, that is."

Hermione felt her breath lodge in her throat. She tugged him up so that his face was leveled with hers; but his eyes were shut tight, and she brushed her lips lightly against his, watching as he finally opened his eyes. Merlin, he looked terrified, a storm of emotions within the depths of his grey eyes.

"That's good," she said softly, "because I love you too."

He smiled then. It was the most honest, genuinely thrilled smile she ever saw from him, rare and boyish and utterly

beautiful. The sight of it made her breathless or perhaps he was the one who made her breathless, because he'd captured her lips within seconds and then he was kissing her, again and again and again, until her mind was racing with thoughts of nothing but him, until he was all she could think of.

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s c o u r g i f y

Cleans target object.

Andromeda was a whirlwind of excitement when she rushed into the kitchen several afternoons later. Hermione was seated at the table with Blaise, Theo and Luna, the four of them elbows deep in separate bowls of flour and sugar.

Baking.

Theo had come in earlier and almost laughed out a lung at the sight, but then Luna had remarked something about how girls – especially the Patil twins – liked men who could bake, and Theo was promptly reeled in hook, line and sinker. Hermione and Blaise had exchanged amused glances. There was something very unusual about the friendship that had sprung between Theo and Luna. In earlier days, it mostly consisted of Theo calling her "Loony" and swearing under his breath whenever she brought up something entirely out of this world (out of any world, really), but the animosity had long since diffused into something else.

So a new bet had begun, this time centred on Theo and Luna. Draco and Pansy thought that Theo still liked his slags and would continue his hedonistic activity to the ends of this earth. Ron and Harry had agreed too, and jumped on the bandwagon by offering their share of two galleons each. Hermione, on the other hand, was a hopeless romantic and she, Blaise and Ginny thought there might be some potential between them. Neville, of course, wasn't involved in the picture. According to Ron, he'd been – "head over heels for Luna, but the git still hasn't summoned any balls to ask her out". Whereupon Draco had offered to conjure up some literal balls for Neville, you know, just for fun.

Ginny had smacked him then.

And Hermione had approved.

She was still thinking about this incident when Andromeda's voice broke her trend of thought. Pushing aside her bowl of batter, Hermione looked up at the older witch, who was telling them two things – the first being that the Order had just gone on a siege to take over the Malfoy Manor.

"The Order's been setting its sights on that place for a long time," Andromeda said, as she put on her apron and took the bowl from Theo, who was making a horrendous mess. "They finally managed to break down the wards less than an hour ago."

Blaise blinked. "The Dark Lord's

headquarters isn't guarded?"

"Apparently, Arthur Weasley says that's no longer the headquarters. It's been relocated."

"Where to?"

Andromeda looked faintly hesitant.

"Well – Hogwarts."

A silence descended upon the group. Hermione could practically see the expressions of nostalgia on Blaise, Theo, Luna and even Andromeda's faces as they evidently recalled their days spent in the school.

"So," Theo finally began, "if the Order wants to defeat the Dark Lord, they're going to have to face him off at Hogwarts?"

Again?"

Blaise shook his head.

"I can't believe the final battle's going to be at Hogwarts."

"It all ends where it first began," Luna didn't seem at all disturbed by the turn of events. Andromeda nodded in agreement, but Hermione didn't miss the faint flicker of sadness in her eyes. After all, Tonks and Remus had died during the battle of Hogwarts three years ago. Hermione vaguely wondered if Andromeda would ever step foot back in Hogwarts again, where the ghosts of the past still lingered.

"What else did you want to tell us, Andromeda?" Hermione asked, in an attempt to divert the conversation to a

lighter matter.

"Oh, right," Andromeda's face lit up now, but she jerked her head in the direction of the living room. Hermione quickly got up and followed her out, watching as Andromeda cast a wordless muffling charm on the room before speaking. They spoke quietly and quickly, and moments later, Hermione was grabbing her satchel and the Cloak of Invisibility. She had just stepped out on the front porch, getting ready to Apparate when a familiar voice stopped her.

"Hey, 'Mione, where're you going?"

Ron.

Hermione spun round quickly, her lips tilting up in a bright smile as she saw the

redheaded wizard and Harry a good distance away, heading down the path towards Andromeda's house. Ever since Draco had expanded 17-65, there was never a day that Harry, Ron, Neville or Ginny didn't visit the house, and they spent most of their time there too, occasionally staying over when they ran late-night missions.

Hermione figured it was only sooner or later before they'd ask to move in. Draco would have a blue fit when that day came and she could only hope that Blaise would capture it on his camera in time.

"I'm going on a heist," she told Harry and Ron now, her smile widening when she saw the looks of surprise on their

faces.

"Are you coming with me?"

"I can't believe I'm risking my life for a bloody Ferret."

Hermione grinned at Ron's disgruntled face and slung a casual arm around his shoulder. He was much taller than she was, though not quite as tall as Draco, and she had to push herself on the tips of her toes to hang onto him, with her other arm around Harry.

"Breaking into the bloody Malfoy Manor, while the Order's battling a

whole hoard of Death-Eaters at the very same place," Ron continued to grumble, even though he secretly looked pleased about the prospect of the Golden Trio finally going on a mission together again, "honestly, if we get ourselves killed I'm going to haunt the Ferret everywhere he goes."

"Everywhere, really?" Harry smirked in amusement.

"Even to the loo?"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, thanks very much for putting that bloody idea into my head."

"You're very welcome. Now I know you fancy Hermione's boyfriend."

"Don't make me hex you – "

Hermione stifled a giggle and shushed

the both of them as a nearby window exploded into smithereens. They were carefully hidden behind a thicket of bushes, with the Cloak of Invisibility hiding the three of them. Ron had said it felt a lot like old times, although Harry was more than sceptical because he realised that the three of them together could barely fit under the Cloak.

"Okay, the coast is clear, what now?"

Hermione carefully considered Ron's question. "Andromeda said it would be somewhere in the attic, where they keep the rest of the Dark potions and ingredients. So we'll start from there."

Swiftly, she cast a Disillusionment charm on the three of them, before stuffing the Cloak back into her satchel.

"Come on."

"Just out of curiosity," Harry said, as they headed towards the side door, "how did you find out that You-Know-Who had phials of phoenix tears?"

"Well, Andromeda used Legilimency on Mundungus Fletcher. She said that since he was a certified thief, he'd know where to get illegal and rare goods. Turns out that Fletcher's in charge of stealing a lot of healing potions from the Malfoy Manor itself, although how he gets in is entirely beyond me."

"So that's how the Order has an endless supply of Dittany," Ron sounded impressed. "I couldn't figure out why. The D.A.'s been trying to find

ingredients for potions, but those they find at Diagon Alley's bloody pricey."

"Everything at Diagon Alley is these days. If you're not pilfering from You-Know-Who's stash, then you have to go to the Black Market. They have everything there."

Harry let out a noise of sheer surprise. "Since when were you into illegal goods?"

Hermione smiled innocently.

"Well, Draco can sort of be considered illegal, and his goods are – "

"Bloody hell, Hermione, don't you dare finish that sentence!" Ron cried, sounding utterly appalled.

"You've been spending too much time with Ferret and Company."

Hermione chuckled. She wasn't actually going to finish the sentence, but she honestly couldn't resist seeing, or hearing, their reactions. But they were now at the doorstep of the Malfoy Manor, and she quickly focused on the matter at hand.

"Okay, ready?" She asked. Harry and Ron mumbled in agreement beside her. Slowly, hesitantly, she pushed open the door, only to hear a cacophony of spells and hexes being cast in arbitrary directions, the occasional scream of pain and the patters of footsteps. Hermione wasn't intending to participate in the fight – all she wanted to do was to get in, get the Phoenix tears and get out, undetected.

The trio were silent as they made their way through the Malfoy Manor, and Hermione knew exactly what Ron and Harry were thinking. It seemed like just yesterday that the three of them were at Malfoy Manor. Even though Hermione was vague on the details, she remembered one part of it perfectly – and she could practically picture herself lying on the marbled floor as Bellatrix Lestrange carved the word Mudblood into her arm.

Without thinking, she slipped her hand through Harry's, and he tightened his grip on hers comfortingly. They headed down the narrow hallway, cowering behind a pillar when a Death-Eater was suddenly flung against the wall next to them. He

recovered swiftly, sending a dazzling red light back at whoever had hexed him, before striding into the room again. They passed the same room, but Ron seemed to pause at the sight of a badly bleeding Dean Thomas duelling two Death-Eaters simultaneously.

"Go," Hermione told Ron softly, nudging him in Dean's direction.

"He needs your help."

"But – "

"Harry and I will be fine. We'll meet you in the attic."

Ron quickly went over to Dean, removing his Disillusionment charm and yelling back hexes with the kind of determination only seen on the battlefield. Several doors down,

Hermione urged Harry to help Professor Trelawney, who was lying beneath a pile of rubble, and headed on alone.

Going on a mission with Ron and Harry was proving to be vastly different from the ones she went on with the four Slytherins – with them, it was just sheer focus on the mission at hand, without any regard to the people around them. Ron and Harry, on the other hand, were more concerned with the well-being of their allies, even at the cost of jeopardising the mission.

She was still keeping close to the wall, blended in perfectly with her surroundings under the Cloak, when she accidentally bumped her head. Wincing, she glanced up, only to frown when she

saw absolutely nothing. She reached out, only to hit something that protruded slightly from the wall.

Her wand was out in the blink of an eye. "Finite Incantatem."

What she saw next was completely unexpected – a portrait of the Malfoy family shimmered into visibility again, the same one she had seen Narcissa staring at when viewing her memories in the Pensieve. She didn't know why it had vanished, but she didn't think twice about magically shrinking the portrait and stuffing it into her bag.

Draco would want this. She knew he would.

Making her way down the narrow hallway, she finally approached the stairs and began to scale it quickly, hiding at every corner she found just in case. She had to duck past two stray spells on the way, and she was just thankful that they were simple stunning spells, and not darker ones. It took awhile, but she finally found the attic and climbed the winding stairs that led up to the uppermost room.

Once inside, she didn't waste a moment to find the phoenix tears. She found several phials of it in one of the shelves and shoved them into her satchel, along with several other important potion ingredients, like bezoar and mandrake essences. There were darker potions,

ones that she recognised from the volatile liquids sloshing within the bottles, and she le_睺 those alone.

She was still clattering about among the bottles when she heard a sudden shifting behind her, and she spun round. Footsteps. Someone was making their way up the stairs. Heart racing in trepidation, she quickly ducked behind a shelf, just in case it wasn't Harry or Ron. It wasn't.

And Hermione saw the living embodiment of one of her greatest nightmares step into the room, a tall witch with a mess of raven black hair and a slightly deranged look on her features. Her shoulders were tilted back proudly, fearlessly, and her lips were

curled in a half-sneer, half-grin that made her look almost maniacal.

It was almost an instinctive reaction for Hermione's thoughts to flit to Draco in the next second, wishing desperately that he was right by her side at that moment. Just as he was when the same aunt of his had tortured her to an inch of her sanity.

She remained stock still now, willing herself not to breathe. But Bellatrix, with the ease of a proficient wizard who had been in far too many battles, had reached out to remove the Disillusionment charm in the blink of an eye. And then Hermione found herself at wand-point, with the tip of Bellatrix's wand digging tightly into her throat.

"Fancy seeing you again, mudblood,"

Bellatrix smiled, and for a moment, Hermione could actually feel the scar on her arm pulse to life. "I figured a little bitch like you had died a long time ago. Guess I was wrong."

Hermione felt her mind shut down. The words were stuck in her throat, her lungs clawing for a breath that would not come. Merlin, she was terrified, and that didn't even begin to describe how she was feeling.

Bellatrix reached over and twisted the girl's arm behind her back, preventing Hermione from directing the wand at her, ignoring the painful cry that escaped the brunette's lips as she struggled futilely. Bellatrix's sharp nails dug deep into her skin, until she was sure they'd

created perforated dents and drawn out blood in the process.

"That's right, Mudblood, embrace it," Bellatrix's laughter was the only thing Hermione could hear, that and her own staggered breaths. And now Bellatrix's wand was a hot glow on her throat, searing right into her skin. "This is what fear feels like."

"Stupefy!"

Ron's voice was hard and furious as he and Harry came rushing into the room. Bellatrix evaded the spell and twisted, snarling at them as she threw a hex at Ron – the green light that jetted out from her wand an indication of the killing curse, plain and simple.

Ron barely evaded the spell, just as

Harry directed his wand at the ceiling.
"Reducto!"

Hermione wrenched herself out of Bellatrix's grip and latched her hand on Harry. The three of them quickly disappeared, the sounds of falling debris and deranged laughter echoing like an endless loop in her head, the phials of phoenix tears safe in her satchel.

The Golden Trio apparated back in a flurry of dust and grime. Once Hermione had steadied herself, she turned to the

two boys, ignoring the flaming pain on her throat.

"Thanks for saving me."

Harry shook his head.

"We've always got your back, you know that."

She shot them a grateful smile and together, the three of them slowly headed into the kitchen. Harry was stumbling slightly, having sprained his leg earlier while helping an Order member in a fight, while Ron was picking out shards of rock that had grazed his arm.

"Merlin," he mused, dragging his elbow up to examine a nasty scrape on it.

"That bloody Bellatrix really has it in for you – "

And then he trailed off as the three of

them suddenly noticed the people in the kitchen. Blaise, Theo, Luna and Andromeda were still baking, but now Draco was in there as well. Andromeda looked utterly relieved to see them, and the others mumbled greetings, but Hermione felt her breath catch as she noticed the look on Draco's face.

His eyes were wide with disbelief, his posture stiff with surprise. It was evident that he didn't know a thing – it was exactly what she and Andromeda had planned after all, to get the Phoenix tears without Draco knowing anything about it.

"Bellatrix?" He repeated, a hard edge in his voice, "you three saw Bellatrix?"

"Actually, we saved 'Mione from

Bellatrix – ow!" Ron trailed off as Hermione elbowed him.

"Where the hell did the three of you go?" The taut anger in Draco's tone was enough for Blaise, Theo and Luna to scramble up from their chairs, hurriedly excusing themselves from the kitchen. Draco didn't even notice them leave, his eyes were focused on Hermione, and when he caught sight of the burn on her neck, his face darkened with fury, a frightening sort of murderous intent in his expression.

"And what the fuck did she do to you?"

"Malfoy – " Harry stepped forward in an attempt to explain, but Hermione held him back.

"I'll explain everything to you in a bit,

Draco." She levelled him with a pleading look that seemed to soften his features and he sighed heavily, turning to the shelves to search for a healing potion.

"Here, 'Dromeda," she pulled the bottles out of her bag and handed it to the older witch, before patting Harry and Ron on their backs.

"Thanks, you two, I really appreciate it."

"Anytime," Ron returned with a grin, while Harry gave Hermione a pointed look, his eyes flickering between her and Draco.

Hermione simply sighed and shook her head. It might be a little tedious to explain this to Draco, but she was certain she could do it.

Funnily enough, it turned out that her worries were unnecessary.

Because the moment they were in their room, Draco had her pressed up against the door, cradling her face carefully in his palms as he kissed her gently. He kept it brief, a light brush of the lips that had her aching for more. "I know," he mumbled against her lips.

"I don't know what you did, but I know you did it for me – so thank you."

She smiled brightly as she looked up at him. "How'd you figure?"

"I'm brilliant, Granger."

Rolling her eyes, she huffed and pushed him away, but her lips were still twitching in amusement.

"Dromeda and I were trying to find a

way to break whatever bond you seem to have with You-Know-Who," she started, wincing lightly when he tapped his wand to the wound on her neck.

Instantly, the discomfort ceased and he held out a phial for her to drink, which she did without any complaints. Once she was done, she handed the bottle back to Draco. He took it, but kept her body tightly melded compliantly against his, content to just hold her there, arms wrapped tightly around her waist, fingers tracing arbitrary patterns along the small of her back and sending tiny delighted shivers glossing down her spine.

"Anyway, based on Dolohov's memories

that you showed to 'Dromeda, and a lot of research, it seems that she may have chanced upon a way," Hermione said, and smiled as Draco's eyes met hers in surprise.

"She's very clever, and she seems to have a strange but incredible understanding of Dark Magic, for some reason..."

"Not a surprise. 'Dromeda, my mum, Bellatrix," he paused, a flicker of hatred crossing his face when he all but spat that last name, " – they were all brought up in a family that practiced Dark Magic."

"Oh, right. 'Dromeda says that the counter-curse has effects similar to Finite Incantatem – but only it's far more

complex and dangerous than that. Feels much like the Cruciatus, although it doesn't damage the brain, but it appears that the physical effects will be far worse. So, 'Dromeda asked Professor Slughorn for an antidote, and he said that creating a potion from unicorn's blood or phoenix tears might help – we are definitely ruling out unicorn's blood because of its cursed effects – "

"So phoenix tears," there was a light of understanding in his eyes now and he nodded, almost reluctantly.

"You still should've told me, though. I can't believe I spent four fucking hours discussing plans with Shackbolt, McGonagall and Longbottom while you were out there risking your life for me."

"I had help. Besides," she continued softly, "you know I'd do anything for you, right?"

"I'm not worth it, Hermione."

She ignored the self-loathing in his voice and leaned forward to kiss him gently, relishing the way he let out a throaty groan in response.

"Anything," she promised against his lips, knowing perfectly well that he would do the same for her.

"To the moon and back."



His nightmares were always quieter than

hers; so quiet that Hermione often didn't even notice he was having one. But she'd slept in the same bed for long enough to figure out the movements he made while unconscious – the sudden tightening of the arm that was belted around her waist, the unsteady falling breaths against her neck, the way his fingers curled so tightly into the palms of his hands she was almost certain he'd bleed. His actions awoke her several nights later, and this time, Hermione didn't waste a moment. She sat up in bed, sliding her palms across his cheeks and brushed the hair from his sweaty forehead. "Draco. Draco, wake up!" It took several more tries before he awoke, his fingers flying up to clamp

down on her wrist tightly. His face was highstrung with volatile terror, and he had to blink several times before finally fixing his gaze on her. And then his features seemed to crumple up, he looked like a hunted animal that was about to meet its doom and something about his expression looked awfully familiar.

"It was just a nightmare," she assured him, when he licked his dry lips to speak, "you're safe now." But her words fell on deaf ears as he suddenly lunged out of bed, heading straight for the bathroom as she gazed after him in confusion.

"Draco?"

"Don't."

The door slammed shut behind him, the lock from inside sliding into place with a sharp, unrelenting click. And when he didn't emerge from the bathroom after ten minutes, Hermione began to frown. She knew for a fact that she was just as much of an open book to read as Draco was a closed one. And after all these months, she'd realised that he had a knack for swallowing his emotions whole and stewing in them for an eternity, if no one else probed.

It was this and, of course, her overwhelming worry for him, that made her reach out for the wand on the bedside table and climb out of bed. She hovered just outside the bathroom for

about thirty seconds or so before impatience finally got the better of her, and she raised a hand to knock.

"Draco?"

There was nothing but silence from inside.

Hermione inhaled and waved her wand at the door. "Alohomora." The door unlatched with a similar click, and she didn't hesitate to push her palm flat against the surface to step in.

"Draco, you know you can – "

But then she paused, blinking as she noticed him. His arms were braced on the sink, damp strips of hair falling into his eyes, his cheeks several shades paler than they had been moments ago. The front neckline of his shirt was wet and

so was his face, like he had vigorously dunked himself in water just to get rid of all traces of the nightmare that he had. It wasn't until she met his haunted grey eyes in the mirror when she realised exactly what he had dreamt about. There was only one other time when he'd stared at her the same way, and the memory of it was perfectly embedded in her mind, never effaced by the years of torturing that she'd suffered.

"You had a nightmare about me," she took a step closer, setting her wand down on the counter.

"Of – Bellatrix torturing me at the Manor, didn't you?"

He nodded numbly, but his gaze instinctively darted down to the scar on

her arm. Even under the dim lighting of the bathroom, her scar was still visible as ever, a constant reminder of how he'd failed her terribly so long ago. He quickly glanced away and shut his eyes. Carefully, Hermione slid her fingers up his arm, holding her breath as she expected him to flinch away. He didn't, and she traced the ridges of veins that slid within his Death Mark, feeling him tense beneath her touch now. She dragged her hand up his shoulder, sinking down against the curve of his neck and stepped even closer, leaving a hairsbreadth distance separating them. Distance that she thought should be diminished in due time.

"You know I've forgiven you for that,"

she said, carding her fingers through his blond hair and waiting for him to ease into her touch. He did eventually, fractionally, but it was enough.

"You didn't have a choice then. To stop her would've meant certain death for yourself, and honestly, even if I hated you then, I would've been devastated if you died."

He opened his eyes slowly and stared at her.

"Sometimes," he started quietly, "I don't know how you can stand looking at me, or even stand breathing the same air as me."

She smiled. "Easy. Because I love you; and that's something even easier than breathing."

His gaze darkened into something inexplicable, unreadable; and then his lips were on hers, consuming and feverish and intoxicating, punctuated nips and sucks on her bottom lip that demanded she ease up for him. She did, and then his tongue was sweeping into her mouth as he dragged his hands up to tangle in her brown locks, angling her head so that he could kiss her deeply, so deeply that she couldn't stop the faint whimper that escaped her mouth and rolled into his. He was different this time, more uninhibited, less controlled – and she felt a delicious thrill run down her spine when he absentmindedly trailed one hand down her neck, his fingers sliding wickedly beneath against

the thin strap of her top. And then his mouth was right where his fingers were, teeth nipping daringly on her skin before his tongue darted out to soothe the sting. He turned his lips to her collarbone, sponging an open-mouthed kiss at the hollow of her neck, before shifting lower to where her phials dangled against her chest.

Hermione sank her fingers into his hair as he reached up, fingers brushing against the underside of her breast through the fabric of her shirt. She let out a throaty moan at the sensations his mere touch evoked – imagine what he could do with his lips – but the sound seemed to effectively snap Draco out of his trance, and he hastily dragged himself

away.

"Hermione," he shut his eyes briefly before opening them again, and there was nothing but apology written on his face. "I didn't mean to – you have to understand that I'm – "

She smiled. "I know."

" – there's just, fuck, there's just too much blood on my hands – "

"I know."

" – I mean, it's there and now my Mark is still active – "

"I know," she reached up to brush her thumbs briefly against his cheeks.

"In spite of, remember? I do want you, regardless." His gaze darkened and he swallowed thickly.

"What?"

A teasing grin curled her lips and she pulled back, quirking an eyebrow at him. "I thought I made myself pretty obvious a long time ago. How did you not know that? I thought you were supposed to be clever – "

His lips were crashing back onto hers before she could even finish the sentence, and then he was resuming the feverish, passionate pace, as if the past minute hadn't transpired at all, as if he hadn't let his fears get the better of him. Hermione let out a languid sigh as she sank back against him, meeting his kisses with equal fervor and feeling a thrill of delight when he groaned against her lips. Merlin, she wanted him with a

desperation that was staggering, and somewhere in her subconscious, she tried to find an appropriate label for exactly how much she did, but she found nothing.

"Evidently, you're far more brilliant than I am," he mumbled, in response to her earlier statement, his hands gripping her waist firmly as he tugged her flush against him. She could feel the hard length of him trapped between them, felt herself wantonly, instinctively grind her hips against his, felt him push back aggressively, a friction that was the perfect mirror of the way they'd been all these years.

Boldly, she slid her hands beneath his shirt, and then he was tugging it off

swiftly, discarding it over his shoulder without a second thought. His skin was slick and fiery to the touch, and she dragged her fingertips experimentally along the planes of his chest. She paused when she reached the two Sectumsempra scars on his chest, one faded and the other still fresh. The curves were intertwining, and she thought of them as runes on his skin, beautiful and tempered and impossible to decipher – enigmas just like Draco himself.

She leaned forward to place several strategic kisses across his chest, tracing the lines of his scars with her lips and tongue, and smiled when his head dropped against her shoulder. "Yeah," he groaned, his voice husky in a way that

made her shiver, "definitely brilliant."

"Actually," she countered, a teasing smile playing on her lips, "when it comes to bedroom activities, I'm depending on your expertise to carry through. I mean, all I have are books and Pansy's very wise advice, but other than that I'm clueless. Very eager to experiment, though," she added wickedly, even though her breath caught when he leaned forward to nip at a sensitive spot on her neck.

"Granger, I fucking swear, your mouth runs on autopilot."

She laughed, her eyes twinkling in the dark. "So let's see, if my mouth can run on autopilot, what can your mouth do – "

She began to laugh, but he swallowed

the sound whole when he crashed his lips to hers again, aggressively pushing her back against the wall, his arms framing her face as he kissed her thoroughly, so thoroughly she could hardly breathe. His hand slid down, looping around the back of her knee and lifting her leg so that she had it wrapped around his lean waist, before doing the same to her other leg. Somewhere in the haziest recesses of her mind, she slowly registered that he was leading them out of the bathroom.

"I'm showing you," he murmured, sponging kisses lower, lower, lower, his mouth on the dip between her breasts, all the while setting her on the edge of his

desk, keeping a firm grip on her hips.
"Aren't I?"

He pulled back to glance at her, fingers tethering on the edge of her shirt – as if he needed her permission, and Hermione shyly, but without any hesitation on her part, pulled it over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra, and she reveled in the way his eyes impossibly darkened even further, the way his breath seemed to catch and the way his fingers tentatively skimmed the smooth expanse of her abdomen before sliding up.

He glossed his fingertips across the hard peaks of her breasts, and she automatically reached for him, dragging him close so that she could latch her mouth on his. The kiss was brief,

because his mouth was soon replacing his fingers, sucking and nipping with gentle fervor, and she was suddenly finding it impossible to breathe. She kept her hands active, first sinking into his hair as she held him close and breathed out his name shakily, before sliding down his chest and feeling his chest rumble as a soft groan ripped itself from his throat, then following the trail of hair leading into the waistband of his sweatpants.

The moment she palmed his erection through his pants, it seemed as though something had snapped within him, and then he wasn't slow or hesitant anymore. He caught her wrists tightly, restraining them down to her sides, before snaking

his arms around her waist, dragging her off the table. Her legs automatically curled round him, and she kissed him bruisingly, wrenching muffled groans from his throat when she sucked on his tongue.

He eased her down onto the bed, casting wordless muffling charms on the room before reaching for the wand on the bedside table and casting a silent contraceptive spell on her. She quirked her eyebrow inquisitively and grinned at him.

"Had a lot of practice with that spell?"

He faltered, and her grin widened.

"Not a surprise, I mean, you did have a lot of slags – "

"You know that none of them can ever

compare to you – "

"That's good," she eased the frown on his forehead with her fingertips and laughed. "Just make sure you put all those years of practice to good use."

"Is that a challenge, Granger?"

Hermione's eyes lit and she propped herself up on her elbows, biting her lip thoughtfully.

"We begin with zero to zero, Gryffindor to Slytherin – "

"I can't fucking believe we're keeping score in the bedroom."

" – I get fifty because, well, I'm a novice. And you get ten for your lovely performance earlier with your mouth – "

He shook his head in mirth. "Only ten?"

He dragged his head up to kiss her hard,

thumbs brushing against her waist in a sweeping motion that made her feel like a piece of beautiful canvas to be painted on. Her breath caught then.

"Shame."

"Keep it together, Malfoy, you're lagging — "

But the rest of her sentence lodged in her throat when he ground his hips demandingly against hers, the feel of his hot, hard length creating a most delicious friction against her core. He slid his palms down even lower, sliding his fingers under the fabric to graze her hips, and then pulled off her shorts and knickers in a swift movement that she could barely register. And then his fingers were sliding into her and his

mouth was by her ear as he hissed, "you're so fucking wet," in a way that made her teeth clamp down on his shoulder, his thumb and two fingers sweeping in a delicious, mind-numbing pattern.

Then his tongue was replacing his fingers, and the air was kicked out of her lungs indefinitely – yes, loving him was definitely easier than breathing – as her fingers sank into his hair and she let out arbitrary gasps of pleasure when his lips and tongue met the right spots again and again and again.

"How many to Slytherin?" He mumbled against her, sounding rather amused when she tightened her grip on his shoulder.

"Fifty." She honestly didn't know how she managed to stammer out the words in her incoherent state. "Fifty to Slytherin." He laughed and then groaned when she gripped him tighter against her. It didn't take long before bursts of pleasure exploded behind her shut eyelids, her fingers digging into his shoulder blades as she rasped his name, struggling to drag the oxygen back into her lungs. He had pulled back fractionally from her by then, and he was watching her almost patiently, but his eyes were molten silver, hot and opaque when she looked up at him. "Fine," she smiled weakly, dragging him up so that she could kiss him, letting out a soft moan when she

tasted herself on his tongue, "hundred to Slytherin."

"Naturally. Slytherin always trumps Gryffindor."

But his breath caught when she slipped her fingers under his pants, and he reached down to pull off the rest of his clothes without a second thought. Her hands were curious and tentative as she wrapped her fingers around his length, and then she experimentally pumped him several times, feeling a shudder rush through her when his head dropped to her shoulder and he swore under his breath.

His fingers were dragging her away before he could lose what little control he had of himself, and he positioned

himself appropriately, then his voice was husky and rough as he murmured into her ear, "this might hurt."

"Of the good kind," she whispered back, "the Cruciatus was worse. So was losing you for the past three years. In a war like this, this is the best kind of hurt possible."

She felt him pause; his heavy breaths against her skin as he leaned down to kiss her, gently, delicately, before finally entering her. The pain was a welcoming sting, and she automatically clamped her teeth down on his shoulder, hooking her arms around his neck. He hissed out as she dragged him in, clenching his jaw and keeping the arch of his spine taut until she slowly grazed her fingers

across his cheek, shifting her legs to draw him in deeper.

Each of his strokes were gentle but demanding, and she found herself responding to him, her fingers unconsciously sliding across the breadth of his shoulders to indent curved marks on his skin. She started to slip again, as he leaned down to sponge arbitrary kisses across her skin; and when his eyes caught a glimpse of the scar on her arm, he shifted his head to brush his lips over the patch of skin. "I'm sorry," she heard him say.

"I love you," she whispered back, whimpering when he captured her lips again, thrusting into her with powerful, purposeful strokes.

Then she was unravelling around him, her breaths escaping in punctuated moans and gasps, her legs clamping tightly around his waist, fingers digging into his skin. Her mind, of course, went in overdrive – Hermione's mind was never empty; it raced instead, with his name and it was Draco, Draco, Draco and nothing else.

He watched her with hooded eyes, tethering at last frayed fringes of his self-control and let out a staggered breath when she reached up to kiss him. "Two hundred to Gryffindor," he mumbled, as she slid her fingers through his hair.

"You're beautiful."

Then he was bringing himself to his own finish, and she was watching him now.

Letting her eyes flutter shut was so easy in the aftermath, but Hermione found herself utterly fascinated by him, his blonde hair falling into his eyes as he absentmindedly freckled kisses on her lips, the way he whispered her name again and again on her skin as he finally released himself inside her.

She reached up to sponge kisses down the bridge of his nose.

"Three hundred to Slyther – "

But his lips on hers effectively shut her up, and then he drew away, dropping his forehead down on hers. He looked entirely spent and relaxed now, the least tensed she'd ever seen him since she first met him months ago.

"Call it even?" He murmured at last,

tucking an errant curl behind her ear.
The way he looked at her made her catch
her breath, and her lips stretched up in a
wide smile. "I adore you."

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4 7

i n c e n d i o

Conjures fire.

Pansy's eyes were narrowed with thinly-veiled interest when Hermione came into the kitchen the next morning. Luna was in there cooking breakfast, and Hermione greeted them pleasantly before slipping into the chair opposite Pansy.

It took exactly five seconds for Pansy to come to a conclusion. "You had sex last

night, didn't you?" The Slytherin witch asked bluntly, her lips curling up in a wicked smirk.

Hermione's mouth fell open. "How did you - "

"You're wearing his shirt - okay, you always wear his shirts, but there's also the fact that you won't stop smiling and you positively reek of the afterglow of sex."

Luna turned to scrape scrambled eggs onto a plate, setting the pan back down on the stove as she surveyed Hermione curiously. "It's an afterglow? I always thought it was an aura."

"It's an afterglow, alright. So, Red, how was he?"

Hermione promptly buried her face in

her hands. "Oh, sweet Merlin."

"That good, huh?"

"What's good?" And now Ginny was striding into the kitchen, running an effortless hand through her red hair. She dragged out the chair next to Hermione and sat down, reaching over to pour herself a mug of tea.

Pansy grinned at Hermione. "Draco Malfoy, apparently."

Ginny's eyes gleamed as she studied her friend for a moment, chuckling at her flushed cheeks and thoroughly mortified expression. "Well, this should be interesting. How is he, really?" Hermione's mouth fell open in abject horror and she simply laughed. "Come on, Hermione, don't you remember the

rumours about Draco Malfoy - Slytherin prince?"

"In Ravenclaw, the nickname for him was the Slytherin snake," Luna commented mildly.

"And there's a reason why he's called a snake. I mean, I've heard that tongue is wicked - and I'm not just talking about what he says," Ginny added, earning a rich chuckle from Pansy. "Ignore all those sodding house rivalry. On the surface, everyone was against Slytherin house, but I've heard rumours, and apparently, some of the best shags were the boys from Slytherin."

"That," Pansy pointed at Ginny, a pleased look on her face, "is actually very true."

"You would know, wouldn't you?"

Ginny's straightforward matter hardly seemed to faze Pansy, who simply winked and speared a bit of scrambled eggs with her fork. Hermione's eyebrows knit together faintly. "Didn't you date Draco in the past?" She asked Pansy curiously, her lips curling into a smile when she saw her friend freeze momentarily. "Why don't you tell us how he was?"

"Okay, first of all," Pansy started, enunciating her words with a pointed jab in Hermione's direction, "we did not date. We had a fling for a couple of months. Meaningless, stupid and honestly, if I could Obliviate that portion of my life, I would. Secondly, I actually

do believe that it makes a huge difference when it's with someone you love. Draco loves you," she smiled at Hermione softly, "ergo, I believe it would be a far better for you."

Ginny hummed in agreement. "Exactly. So now, put us all out of our misery and tell us about how Draco Malfoy is in the sack - "

"Ginerva Weasley, don't you dare finish that bloody sentence!"

A familiar voice made them all turn, only to see Ron standing by the doorway, an appalled expression on his face. Harry was beside him, but he seemed far more amused than anything, going over to peck Ginny briefly on the cheek and settling down on the chair beside her.

"Oh, lighten up, Ronald," Ginny rolled her eyes. "I've heard you, Seamus, Dean and Neville talk about the Ravenclaw girls in a way that makes me want to claw my eyes out. Yes, they even talk about you, Luna," she said, when the blonde witch turned to look at her quizzically.

Luna cheeks reddened. Ron, on the other hand, looked like he wanted to dig a hole and bury himself in it forever.

Pansy's eyes gleamed. "Ravenclaw, really, Weasley? Because I talked to Tracey the other day; and she had some very interesting things to tell me. For a moment there I thought you were beginning to have a thing for Slytherins." "Not for a relationship," Harry laughed.

"More for the shagging. Right, Ron?"

"Thanks, mate." Ron deadpanned, but his gaze had flickered over to Pansy, a probing question in his eyes, and she immediately caught it.

"Oh, don't fret, Weasley," she said.

"Tracey had nothing but praises for you. Very kind, very giving in bed, though she did think you had some brushing up to do on your tongue-work."

"Maybe you should ask Malfoy to give you some pointers," Ginny suggested mockingly.

Ron looked disgusted. "I would never ask the Ferret for pointers on how to shag - "

"Don't worry, I wouldn't waste shagging tips on you, Weasel," Draco's amused

drawl sliced through the conversation. He strode in with Blaise in tow, a lazy smirk on his face as he braced his arms on the back of Hermione's chair. Luna tossed him an apple and he caught it, deftly sinking his teeth into the fruit and biting off a generous chunk before handing the rest to Hermione, who eagerly took it.

"Where's 'Dromeda?" He asked her quietly, as the conversation around them ensued when Ginny continued to mock Ron about his skills in the bedroom, or lack thereof. "And Teddy?"

"Teddy's with Grus. And 'Dromeda went to brew the potion with Slughorn."

"Here's hoping it works," Draco's mumbled, but he felt his breath catch

when Hermione tilted her head to kiss him briefly, her lips sliding against his with perfect familiarity. In his peripheral vision, he saw Harry's disgusted face as he noticed them, and Draco was casting a wandless spell on Harry before he could even blink. "Obscuro."

"Very mature, Malfoy." Harry grumbled, dragging off the magical blindfold that wrapped around his head to temporarily block off his vision.

Draco smirked. "Then stop staring, Potter."

Breakfast proceeded in its usual fashion when Neville arrived several minutes later. Luna and Blaise whipped up a breakfast that was consumed equally as quickly by the others. Harry, Ron and

Neville, in particular, ate like they hadn't seen food in days, and Hermione had to smack Ron on the back when he began to choke.

Moments later, the sound of Theo's voice distracted the group from the easy-going conversation that had preceded at the table. Hermione followed Draco's gaze to where Theo was yawning lazily and dragging a tired hand through his tousled hair, heading down the stairs slowly.

With the Patil twins in tow.

A startled, horrified silence descended upon the table, with the exception of the other Slytherins, who seemed to have predicted this, Luna, who was calm in just about every situation and Hermione, who tried to straighten her face and

prevent herself from laughing, especially when she saw the look of abject horror on Neville's face.

"Parvati?" Neville was the first to break the silence, his eyebrows shooting up high on his forehead as he stared at them in disbelief. "Padma?"

The twins looked thoroughly embarrassed as they greeted the group shyly, and then Theo was ushering them out of the door. "We should do this again sometime, ladies," he was saying suavely, before closing the door and heading into the kitchen with a smug grin on his face. But his grin faltered as he noticed the appalled looks in the kitchen and he frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," Blaise said mildly, "though it

seems you haven't left your ménage à trois days behind."

"They were twins!" Theo pointed out, as though that were explanation enough.

"Twins!"

"We can see that." Draco was the only one still calmly eating amidst the stunned silence. "Given your thirty-second world-record, I assume you now lasted for sixty-seconds since there were two of them?"

A bubble of laughter escaped from Hermione's lips, which she hastily tried to stifle when Theo narrowed his eyes at her. "No one's judging, Theo," she said warmly.

"No, we are definitely judging," Ron looked almost green in the face. "What

the hell? How did you get both the Patil twins to do - nevermind, I really don't want to know."

"It's actually not much of a surprise," Luna said in amusement. "In sixth year, Cormac tried to get the both of them to date him too."

"But it's Cormac. Everybody knows that guy's sexual drive runs so rampant he'd hump trees."

"Obviously, you've never met Theo," Pansy grinned, shooting Theo a pointed look.

Ginny covered her eyes and groaned. "I am never going to look at them the same way again. Can we please discuss strategies for the final battle instead? Malfoy, what did Shackbolt say when

he came over to talk to you the other day?"

Ginny's feeble attempt to switch the conversation made Draco's lips twitch in faint amusement. "Several things," he started slowly, trying to collect his thoughts, well aware that everyone's attention was on him now. "One - that the Order's been recruiting members of the Rebellion and they've gathered enough to face off the Dark Lord's army."

Neville stopped him by raising a finger. "Why do you keep calling him the Dark Lord? The rest of us call him You-Know-Who, apart from the four of you."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Sorry, we're not juveniles. We call him the Dark Lord."

"But you don't serve him anymore - "

"Let's compromise," offered Theo. "We'll call him the man who breathes through a vagina - "

"No," Draco practically growled, "don't fucking ruin sex for me."

"Of course you wouldn't want it ruined for you," Ginny interjected sweetly, casting a surreptitious look at Hermione whose cheeks promptly flamed red.

Draco threw Ginny a frosty glare and continued. "As I was saying, the bloody Order intends to attack Hogwarts, which is basically the Dark Lord's new headquarters, during a time when the Dark Lord himself and his top Death-Eaters are away - in hopes that they can thin out his army before he returns and also to free any prisoners in the castle.

Shacklebolt says that they're going to start from the bridge, enter through the clock tower courtyard and make their way in from there."

"So will we be a part of it?" Blaise asked curiously.

"It's up to the rest of you."

"Well, I'm in," Ron was the first to say, before turning to Neville, who nodded.

"Harry?"

"Sounds rather reckless," Harry seemed rather hesitant, pushing up his glasses further up the bridge of his nose and turned to Draco. "If You-Know-Who gets wind of the siege and comes back, will the Order be expecting Neville to duel him?"

Draco faltered then, and Hermione

automatically slipped her hand through his under the table. "Either one of you," he acceded, at last, the expression in his eyes almost guarded. "And yes - I believe the Order hopes this battle will be their last."

"What if it isn't? What if we don't win?" Draco didn't reply. It was a question he could never find an answer to.

Watching Andromeda remove the curse from Draco's Dark Mark had to be one of the most painful things Hermione ever had to witness. She stood in the kitchen, watching silently as Andromeda murmured intricate, complex

incantations under her breath. Andromeda's wand was poised over the Dark Mark, and a black wisp of light slid out from her wand, curling itself around Draco's arm in a vice-like grip.

The pain was a slow, gradual build up, and Hermione saw Draco clench his jaw first, before his nails dug into the table, then he was biting down on his other arm to stop himself from screaming. It was as though something was shifting below his Dark Mark, rippling beneath the surface of his skin as the spell slowly ripped it from him.

Hermione stepped forward instinctively, but one sharp glance from Andromeda made her fall back. She couldn't help but think that the situations were reversed

now. A long time ago, Draco had watched as Bellatrix Lestrange tortured her with the Cruciatus. And now, she was watching as Andromeda removed the Dark curse on him.

She understood how Draco felt now - it was the same feeling of utter, complete helplessness, the kind you were first waist deep in, and before you knew it, you were drowning, dragging in oxygen into your lungs, only to have them filled with thick water, suffocating.

And so she bit down on her bottom lip, blinking away the tears that sprung to her eyes as she watched Draco. His face was white as a sheet, blonde hair clinging in damp locks against his forehead, but he kept his eyes fixed on

her the whole time.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, Andromeda pulled back and nodded at Hermione. "Heal him," she directed calmly, even though her face was pale. "I'll get the potion."

Hermione didn't waste another second. Holding her wand over his bleeding arm, she mumbled the *Vulnera Sanentur* spell to heal the gaping wounds, as Andromeda reached over to lift the phial of potion to Draco's lips. It took awhile, and then all that was left were the sounds of Draco's unsteady breaths as he trembled in the aftermath.

"I'm going to check up on Teddy," Andromeda said quietly to Hermione, after she had made sure that Draco was

okay. The spell seemed to have worked, and Draco's Dark Mark was now a faded scar just like the rest of the Slytherins'. "Call me if you need anything."

She turned to leave the kitchen, only to be stopped by Draco's weary rasp. "'Dromeda.'" She glanced at him over her shoulder and he nodded at her once. "Thanks."

Her lips curled up in a smile. "You're welcome."

Then she left, and Draco slowly dragged himself so that he was sitting, instead of slumped over the table. Hermione reached over to brush his hair out of his eyes, and he shifted, lips pressing briefly against her wrist. And then he was

looking down at his scar, fingers tracing lightly over the faint ridges of the Mark.

"I feel clean," he said at last, in a voice so quiet it was almost inaudible. "For the first time - I'm not one of them."

She placed her scarred arm next to his, watching as his fingers slowly slid past his own arm to trace the uneven letters on hers, and smiled. "You've never been one of them, Draco."

"Keep up, Potter, you're getting sloppy." Harry scowled at Draco's taunting remark and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the edge of his sleeve. The two had been practicing duelling for

the past hour and a half, upon the Order's request to train up for the upcoming battle.

While Shacklebolt had offered proper amenities and lessons for everyone to attend as preparation, the four Slytherins had been more than reluctant to train with the rest of the Order members, and ultimately decided it was better if they trained among themselves. It now became a common sight to see any of the ten members of 17-65 practicing duelling in the garden out front, or in the backyard of the house.

Hermione was now sitting on the front porch with Ron, watching as Harry shot spell after spell at Draco, who deflected them without even batting an eyelid. In

many ways, she could identify with Harry - he didn't seem to want to hurt anyone on purpose, and that weakened his attacks marginally, even if he was highly skilled at magic.

Draco, on the other hand, was a veteran at duelling. She saw it in his stance, the way he ducked and weaved past spells, his eyes alert and actions swift. Draco had always been graceful, even back during Hogwarts days; and when duelling, he moved with the agility and poise of some kind of animal.

Ron seemed to notice this too, and he nudged Hermione. "If all Death-Eaters fight like him, I don't think the Order's going to fair very well."

"He used to be the top Death-Eater,"

Hermione voice was steady, despite the fact that she did share Ron's concerns. "He's better than most of them. I'm sure the Order wouldn't have a problem handling the less skilled ones."

"Not if the Death-Eaters use Dark Magic."

Hermione kept silent. Ron was right, and the Death-Eaters, particularly cruel ones like Dolohov and Bellatrix, were not above using any of the Unforgivables. They thrived on Dark curses and, in that aspect, proved far more lethal than a Death-Eater like Draco with a conscience.

"Don't stay in a fixed position, Potter," Draco's calm directions drew Hermione from her thoughts. She watched as he

sidestepped a hex before sending one back that Harry barely deflected. "Keep yourself mobile. Don't use stinging hexes - Death-Eaters thrive on those and the Cruciatus because they like toying with their food. You put them down before they can do anything to you - "

Harry rolled his eyes and hurled another hex at Draco. "Stupefy!"

"Don't tell me what you're casting. It helps if you're surreptitious about it. Try fighting like a Slytherin for a change."

"Merlin, why're you such a prick even on the battlefield?"

"It's an all round-the-clock job, Potter, and do concentrate. I'd hate to kill you before the Dark Lord does."

Ron sniggered in spite of the insult, and

stood up. "Hey, Malfoy!"

Hermione saw the ploy even before her friends carried it out. The moment Draco turned to face Ron, Harry grabbed the window of opportunity and drew his wand back to cast a spell at him. Quick as thought, she directed her wand at him. "Expelliarmus!" She murmured under her breath, just as Draco casted a Protego after seeing Harry's attack in his peripheral vision.

Harry's wand flew out of his grasp and into Hermione's, and she folded her arms across her chest, smiling in satisfaction as both Harry and Ron looked at her with dismay, while Draco smirked, an evident gleam of pride in his eyes as he watched her.

"Mione, you ruined it!"

She laughed at Ron's exclamation. "My apologies - it was instinct. Here, Harry," she walked over and handed him his wand, before casting several healing spells over the scratches he'd taken from the duel earlier.

"Thanks." Harry dragged a tired hand through his hair, slowly heading back to the porch and sitting down wearily on the front steps.

Hermione joined him and so did Ron, each of them sitting on either side of him. Draco faltered for a moment, looking almost awkward and reluctant to join the Golden Trio, but he was quickly convinced when Hermione held out a hand to beckon him over.

"Do you think we can win?" Ron asked, after a prolonged moment of silence.

Harry and Hermione simply had no response to his question, and so they were surprised when Draco was the one to answer. His voice was quiet, his gaze fixed far ahead, unfocused and distant, but Hermione had never heard him sound more determined before.

"We have to."

She found him several hours before the beginning of the final battle, sitting on the window ledge near the Pensieve, hugging a photo frame to his chest. It was the one she'd brought back for him

from the Manor, and when he first saw it, the expression on his face was one polarised between sadness and joy.

But he was emotionless now, his grey eyes blank as he stared into the darkness, only flickering up when she entered the room. "Are they all here?"

She knew who he was talking about. While the entire Order and Rebellion had gathered on the moors near the Hogwarts castle, Draco had arranged for the ten members of 17-65 to meet at Andromeda's house - the one place they all felt safest during this war.

Safe.

Hermione couldn't help but think that this word no longer had a definition at a time like this. "Yes," she went over, sitting

down on the ledge next to him. "They're in the living room."

Draco was silent for so long she almost began to think that he hadn't heard her. Each second seemed to take an infinity to tick by, and Hermione wished for this night to be over, if it would ever be over. There was no knowing how long this battle would last.

"I'm terrified," Draco said at last, his voice almost inaudible but she heard him anyway.

"Me too."

"If we don't win this time round - the war may never end."

"I know."

His lips quirked up in a brief smirk. "This would be a good time to use that

Gryffindor optimism of yours to cheer me up, Granger."

She laughed at his sardonic tone, and slid her fingers through his, leaning her head against his shoulder. "This would be a good time to have faith."

She felt his lips brush gently against her forehead as he fell silent. And all she could register was the even sounds of their breathing mingling in the terrifying silence.

The grounds of Hogwarts were silent as a grave that night.

In the deepest recesses of her memories, Hermione vaguely recalled a glowing,

cheerful castle, alive with the hum of chatter and laughter. But that was a long time ago. All that was left now was a decrepit, ruined castle, enveloped in darkness of the most despairing, miserable kind, with a flock of dementors circling the sky overheard.

She clutched Draco tightly as he manoeuvred them towards the castle on his broom, with the rest of 17-65 following behind them. Below, the Order was making their way across the bridge in hundreds, heading for the Clock Tower, where they would begin their attack.

Draco, on the other hand, was more concerned with safeguarding the place, keeping the battle within the grounds and

killing off the Death-Eaters in Hogwarts before Voldemort was alerted to the fact that the castle was under siege and brought the rest of his army over.

Hermione soon found herself in one of the dark hallways where Draco dropped her off. His silver eyes were glinted edges in the dark, but beyond the determined, calm façade, she could see that he was terrified. So was she.

And so she held him back before he could leave, reaching up to kiss him. Her lips moulded against his in a yearning sort of desperation as she threaded her fingers through his hair. He kissed her back equally as frantically, arms belting tightly around her waist as though he wished to whisk her away to some place

safe.

His lips wrenched away from her mouth and trailed past her jaw, to a sensitive spot beneath her ear, his breaths harsh and unsteady. "I love you," he whispered, and she felt her chest tighten at his words, her fingers dragging down to his shirt to grasp the fabric tightly. "You know that, right?"

"Never doubted it."

"Because of who you are and in spite of who you are," he added, almost absent-mindedly.

Her lips were curving up in a fond smile then, amidst the tremendous brevity of the situation they were in, and she slid her palm up his cheek, her brown eyes locking on his silver ones. "Do you

always have to one-up me, Malfoy?"

"Always, Granger."

He kissed her again, pulling back far too soon for her liking, and then he was climbing back on his broom, vanishing into the darkness.

Hermione felt the loss as soon as he was out of sight, an empty, devastating feeling weighing down on her. Her fingers automatically grasped for the phials hanging around her neck, while her other hand reached for the Cloak of Invisibility in her satchel. She pulled it on and made her way slowly up to the Astronomy tower, where Harry and Ron were waiting.

The two of them were gazing out the open window, but turned when they

heard her footsteps. Ron grinned. "Had a good snogging session with the ferret?" She rolled her eyes, but there was no denying it, or the flush that rose to her cheeks. "None of your business," she mumbled, trailing off as she glanced round at the place. It looked vaguely familiar, and she remembered having climbed this tower before. Several times, perhaps.

She wondered if she could see the constellation Draco from here.

"I remember the last time I was here," said Harry, when she sidled up to him. His voice was calm, even though there was a flicker of pain in his eyes. "Malfoy was about to kill Dumbledore, the rest of the other Death-Eaters were

there. And I couldn't do a thing because I'd been hit with a Petrificus. And then I was watching Snape step in with the killing curse, and Dumbledore was falling off this bloody tower."

"You couldn't do a thing, mate," Ron said now, as Hermione rubbed comforting circles on Harry's back. "You've seen Snape's memories. You know that Dumbledore was going to die sooner or later."

Harry let out a hum of agreement, his eyes still trailed on the crowd of people making their way across the bridge. "This is - different," he murmured. "The first time we fought, there was this flicker of hope and I felt like we were fighting to win. I have no idea what

we're fighting for this time. I just hope all of us make it out alive."

His words made Hermione's chest tighten painfully. "We're fighting to survive, then," she replied. "We're fighting to be safe." She saw the last of the crowd cross the bridge and turned to Harry. "They're ready."

"Yeah." Ron's posture was rigid now. "It's your call, Harry."

Harry stepped back, raising his wand out to the open sky overhead. Hermione and Ron did the same, their wands poised to defend. Hermione could feel her heart thundering in her ears, knowing that the moment Harry cast the shield around the castle, there would be nothing but a bloodbath from here on out.

"Ready?" He glanced at the other two. They nodded, and he took a deep breath. "Protego Maxima," he said, at the same time as Ron said, "Fianto Duri," and Hermione said, "Repello Inimicum".

A large protective barrier drew itself around the entire outskirts of the castle, an impregnable fortress that would disintegrate anyone who came close to it; a shield only detectable by the faint hum of magic if one strained their ears to hear it.

And then the air was quiet and still as the three of them waited for the storm to come.

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a v a d a k e d a v r a

Instantaneous death.

How do you fight a war knowing you've already lost once?

Hermione Granger didn't know the answer to that.

But she did know that she couldn't risk losing anything more. The battle had begun in the Quad next to the Clock Tower, starting with Shacklebolt casting

the first spell as a Death-Eater emerged from the shadows.

Tuning her ears out to the sounds of screaming and hexing below, she quickly took out the Cloak of Invisibility from her satchel and draped it over herself. She knew she had to head to the Grand Staircase as per Draco's orders, sealing up the windows with protective charms along the way and finding prisoners locked up in any of the rooms.

But then two people slid under the Cloak next to her, and she scowled at the redhead wizard on the left and the black-haired one on her right. "What are you boys doing?"

"Oh, come on, 'Mione," Ron's voice was surprisingly light-hearted despite the

grave situation. He grinned, but she noticed the tension in his eyes and realised that he was just trying to diffuse the terrifying atmosphere surrounding them. "We'll all be safe under this Cloak."

Harry chuckled in agreement. "Besides, it'll be like old times."

She rolled her eyes and slung her arms round their shoulders. The three of them made their way awkwardly down the stairs of the astronomy tower, not without the occasional bump and accidental stepping on each other's toes along the way.

After Ron had clumsily bumped against the railing for the third time, he swore under his breath. "Merlin, this bloody

Cloak is far too small for the three of us."

"It's only big enough for two people, at most," Hermione explained.

"Just out of curiosity," Harry started, almost uncertainly, staring at her with suspicion in his eyes. "When you say 'big enough for two people', are you implying something along the lines of you shagging Malfoy under this Cloak?"

Hermione hadn't, but she couldn't help the smirk that curved her face. "Well..."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Ron hastily extricated himself from the Cloak and Harry followed suit, the both of them practically running away from her down the hallway.

Hermione chuckled as she watched them

go. The Cloak ultimately belonged to Harry and she had kept it in its best condition so she could return it to him when the war was over. But she wasn't going to rectify what Ron and Harry had evidently misinterpreted. The Cloak was hers for the time being and she had a job to do.

Hiding in a tiny alcove, she took out the Marauder's Map from her satchel and used it to navigate her way towards the Grand Staircase. Unlike the others, who had a firm grasp of the school, her memories of this place were convoluted and she needed the Map. Pansy and Blaise were already at the grand staircase, while the rest were making their way towards the meeting place

slowly from different directions. Theo and Luna were slowly but surely making their way there too. Ginny's footsteps on the Map were quick, and so were Neville's - they were evidently on brooms. And Draco was -

Where was Draco?

Skimming past the countless of names on the Map, she tried to locate him, ignoring the pounding of blood rushing in her ears. She soon saw his name somewhere in the Middle Courtyard, but the relief that surged through her was quickly replaced with an ominous feeling when she noticed how he was stationary in a singular spot.

Her first thought was to apparate over, but Draco had told her that Hogwarts

had anti-apparition and disappearance wards. Without a second thought, she turned on her heels and ran towards him, but there was still a long way more to go. The blood surging through her veins was like a toxic, addictive form of adrenaline that came only in the face of danger, and there was only one thought that pounded through her mind.

Save Draco.

She found the solution several hallways down. Glancing out, she noticed a Death-Eater flying past on his broom and didn't hesitate to train her wand on him. "Everte Statum!" The Death-Eater was flung off his broom, and she held out her other hand. "Accio broom."

Then she was climbing on, fastening the

Cloak tightly around her and easing forward on the broom. It jolted with a dangerous lurch, and Hermione bit her lip to keep from screaming before kicking off. She wasn't at all adept at flying, and she made several frightening swerves as she navigated her way towards the Middle Courtyard.

It wasn't until she jumped off the broom and rushed into the clearing when she realised what had happened to Draco. He was twisting and struggling on the floor as a flock of Dementors attacked him, swooping down and slowly sucking the very life out of him.

Hermione quickly threw the Cloak off herself, provoking the Dementors to fly towards her instead. They were several

feet away when she shut her eyes tight and summoned the happiest memory she could think of - Draco, always Draco - and held her wand out.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Draco lifted his head weakly in her direction, watching the Dementors disperse every which way as a magnificent Patronus in the shape of a dragon protected the both of them. Then her face crumpled in relief as she rushed towards him, just in time for Draco to notice a Death-Eater shadow her, his wand trained on her lithe figure.

The curse that teased his tongue was an Avada, but he barely caught it and shot the next one he could think of. "Confringo!"

Hermione's shocked face was almost comical as she saw the spell zip towards her, only to miss her by mere inches and blast the Death-Eater behind her in a fiery explosion. She quickly gathered her wits about her, sinking down to her knees and pulling Draco up, the sudden realisation that she had just saved his life crashing down equally as hard as the realisation that he had saved hers simultaneously.

It wasn't long before the two found their way back. The rest of 17-65 were standing around in a safe corner near the Grand Staircase, where Blaise was doing his best to calm Harry and Ron, who looked thoroughly distressed.

"We should never have left her in the hallway!" Ron was saying, as Hermione headed towards them with Draco, well-hidden under Disillusionment charms. Ron was running frantic fingers through his hair, while Harry kept pushing his glasses up his nose in evident anxiety.

"Who knows where she is now?"

"Missed me, Weasel?" Draco drawled, slowly removing the Disillusionment

charms on himself and Hermione. Ginny rushed over to envelope Hermione in a fierce hug.

Neville's eyes were wide. "Malfoy?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "No, it is I - the Dark Lord."

The tension immediately skyrocketed at his statement; Hermione and the three other Slytherins exchanging amused glances, until Neville recovered with a heavy glare directed at Draco. "That's not funny, Malfoy!"

Draco simply smirked, but the grin quickly faded when he heard a sudden explosion from the rooftop of the tower. "They're here," he said quietly, feeling Hermione instinctively sidle closer to him. The others were staring at him with

expectant looks on their faces. "Stand ground here. Keep them out, or put them down. Don't let them in the Great Hall. McGonagall says that the Order's setting up an infirmary in there, and we can't let any Death-Eater in - "

His words were abruptly cut off when Theo, whose sharp senses detected things before any of them could, suddenly whirled around. "Expulso!"

His spell narrowly missed a Death-Eater who had just entered, but more came in after him. And then Draco was pushing the others out of the way as Luna joined in alongside Theo, while Blaise protected the others with a shield.

"Let's go! Potter," Draco grabbed onto Harry and climbed on his broom. "Get

me up there."

"What? Why - "

"Just go!"

Harry swerved past a spell and took off, swiftly flying them to the highest point of the stairs. Draco had just got off the broom when a tremendous explosion blasted off the roof of the stairs, and Harry was casting a powerful shield to protect them from the falling debris. They barely had time to recover when the stairs suddenly lurched forward, and the two of them dropped to their knees to regain their balance.

"What the hell?" Harry gaped as the stairs below them began moving as well, at arbitrary speeds and at irregular times. During the last battle, these stairs

had been motionless. "Who activated the stairs?"

"It's a tactic, Potter," Draco didn't look surprised at all, his eyes alert as he watched the shattered roof closely. "Best way to kill your opponent is to let them plummet to their deaths on the moving stairs."

"And you knew about this?"

"Why else did I arrange for us to fight in the Grand Staircase?" Draco returned. "Get Ginny, do an aerial sweep with her. I'll fend them off from here."

Harry agreed and took off, leaving Draco on the moving stairs. He climbed up, landing neatly on the seventh floor just as that particular flight of stairs jerked away from the platform and spun

round to another landing. It was mere seconds before the first Death-Eater came swooping through the shattered roof, aiming a hex at Draco.

"Malfoy!" It was Augustus Rockwood, and he grinned as Draco narrowly dodged the spell. "The Dark Lord will be pleased to see you."

"Give the Dark Lord my regards," Draco fired back calmly, side-stepping the next spell and blocking the one that followed. He was keeping one eye on the moving stairs, wondering how he could make use of it to his advantage. "Tell him Draco Malfoy says hi. And to hit me up for fucking tea and crumpets when he's not busy massacring the entire Wizarding world."

"I'd much rather kill you first then relay any of your asinine messages. There's a bounty on your head, you know?"

"Really?" Draco feigned great interest, but he froze when he noticed several other Death-Eaters heading his way on their brooms. "What's my bounty? It had better be higher than saint Potter's. Expelliarmus."

Rockwood's wand flew out from his hand. With an angry roar, the Death-Eater flew straight towards Draco to physically knock him over, but Draco jumped off the ledge just as the stairs swivelled back to the platform. He put Rockwood down with a blasting curse, before running down the steps to the sixth floor, bracing himself for the next

series of attacks.

His actions weren't missed by Hermione, who had heard the roof explode with a force that shook the entire tower. She grabbed onto Ron, who was busy fending off several Death-Eaters alongside Pansy and Blaise. "Get me up there," she told him, pointing skywards.

His eyes widened when he noticed the Death-Eaters flying in from the roof, and nodded. Hermione climbed onto the broom after him, and the two took off. Ron deposited her on the fifth floor, before heading back down to help Neville below. Hermione waited for the staircase that Draco was on, jumping on it when it swung past her platform,

before scaling the last few steps so that she was beside him and casting a spell.

"Protego Maxima!"

Her shield blocked the next Dark spell that the Death-Eater shot at them, while Draco didn't waste a second hurling one back the moment her shield was down.

His spell hit the Death-Eater square on his chest, and Draco shot a brief grin over his shoulder at her. "Here to save me again, Granger?"

"Naturally." She winked at him, before holding up her wand. "Avis."

"Oppugno." The flock of conjured birds that streamed out from Hermione's wand were promptly redirected by Draco to attack the nearest Death-Eater.

She smiled, pleased by his perfect

synchronicity with her, and stayed by his side to fight. His duelling style was of a more offensive kind, a variation of blasting curses fused with stinging spells that were meant to cripple their enemies. Hers, on the other hand, was defensive by nature, and the impenetrable shields she cast saved the both of them more than once, giving Draco the window of opportunity to recover and hex their enemies back.

The rest of the team had since separated, and Hermione glanced down several times to note that each of them had taken a single floor. She and Draco fought off Death-Eaters on the sixth and seventh, while Blaise was one floor below them, followed by Pansy on fourth, Theo on

third, and Luna on second. Harry and Ginny were on their brooms, occasionally weaving between the moving stairs to help with the duelling, while Ron and Neville were holding their ground on the first floor, bravely fending off any Death-Eaters that entered the tower.

A shout from below soon dragged Hermione's attention away, and she spun round to see Blaise being knocked off his balance by a Death-Eater, followed by Pansy's shrill scream as she rushed to save her boyfriend, who was now dangling on the ledge.

Draco was nudging Hermione in the next instant. "Help them," he told her, just as he blasted another Death-Eater off the

stairs.

She didn't need to be told twice. Leaning over the side of the stairs, she directed her wand at Blaise. "Carpe Retractum."

A magical rope slid out from her wand, spiralling several feet down to latch onto Blaise's waist. Pansy slowly pulled him up with the help of Theo, who had rushed over to protect them the moment he saw Blaise topple off the stairs, and Hermione waited until Blaise had been lifted to safety before letting go of the rope.

She turned back to Draco, feeling a surge of pain in her chest when she took in his bruised features - he'd taken several hits on her behalf in order to protect her, and resumed fighting. On and

on and on, until she felt her eyes burn with the effort of keeping them peeled for any wayward spells. Her throat was dry and her heart had hammered in her chest for so long it was a wonder she hadn't exploded with the effort.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a corporeal Patronus in the form of a stag gallop towards Draco. Draco pulled Hermione down, the two ducking behind the side of the stairs as the stag slowed in front of them.

"Incoming fiendfyre!" The distorted voice from the stag sounded remarkably like Harry's. "Sweeping in from the Quad!"

"Fuck," Draco swore, vanishing the stag with a wave of his wand. "Time to go."

Hermione nodded breathlessly and rushed down the stairs, leaping onto the platform and ducking behind the balcony, just as Draco amplified his voice to call for a retreat. They were never going to make it, she realised, so when the next flight of stairs locked onto the sixth floor platform, she stepped on and directed her wand at the stairs.

"Glisseo!"

The stairs flattened to a slide at her feet and she slid down, tumbling ungracefully onto the floor below next to Blaise, who was also on the same flight of stairs as she was. "Good thinking, Red," he rasped, brushing the blood from the corner of his mouth and grabbing her hand. "Come on!"

He dragged her onto the next moving stairs before they missed it, heading down each floor with minimal difficulties this time as Hermione cast the same spell on the stairs, over and over, hurrying a frazzled Pansy along the way and picking up a badly injured Theo who was protected by Luna.

"Jump!" Hermione urged them, when the next flight of stairs was taking far too long to swivel over. She did so first, casting a Cushioning charm on the bottom before she could hit the ground. The others followed her, rushing to join Ron and Neville, who were ushering people away from the Quad.

"Use the viaduct!" Neville was yelling, his face pale and forehead bleeding.

"Retreat!"

It was a flurry of horrified screams and shouts, with people pushing their way through blindly, aimlessly, just to escape the terrifying, all-consuming flames sweeping towards them. Hermione felt herself jostled among the crowd, and she kept a tight grip on Blaise and Pansy, careful not to lose any of her friends. Her eyes were still fixed on Draco several floors above, making his way down while fending off the remaining of the Death-Eaters.

"We have to go!" Blaise ordered, shoving the rest of them after the crowd.

"Luna, get Theo and get out of here."

Luna and Theo were the first to leave, but the others stayed to help those who

were badly injured. Hermione kept her attention on Terry Boot, who had collapsed midway due to a broken leg. She binded his leg swiftly and helped him over to the other D.A. members, while Blaise and Pansy did the same for Cho, who had half of her face burnt in a blasting spell.

"Where's the Order?" Draco demanded moments later, pushing his way through the crowd. Majority of the people were members of the Rebellion that had joined their side, or prisoners that had been previously captured by the Death-Eaters. But the forerunners of the Order were nowhere in sight.

"Some of them are still out there!" Ron called back. "Shacklebolt's trying to

round up the rest but we've got to stop the fire before it kills them all!"

"You can't stop Fiendfyre," Neville interjected, only to be brushed aside by Draco as he headed towards the Quad. "Malfoy!"

Draco paused and turned to the two of them. His eyes were searching for Hermione rapidly, and he finally found her lifting a young girl to her feet some distance away, soothing the girl's tears and whispering encouraging words into her ear.

"You - get everyone out of here," he said quietly to Neville, ignoring the way his eyes widened. "And you," he gripped Ron's arm tightly now. "Get her out of here."

"Malfoy - "

"I mean it, Weasel," Draco levelled him a firm gaze. "Keep her safe at any cost."

Without waiting for either of them to reply, Draco turned and vanished into the crowd.

Everywhere she turned, Hermione saw a sea of red.

Red streaking down people's faces, red-

rimmed eyes mourning the lost of loved ones, red staining the clothes of the victims. It was war at its finest, and Hermione was in the middle of it all, watching people jostle and hurry past her along the Viaduct.

She tried not to think about the losses - there were at least eight casualties she knew about, Dean Thomas, Michael Corner and Seamus Finnigan from the D.A. being among the eight - along with many others she was thankful she didn't know about. Draco had once told her that in a war, numbing oneself proved to be incredibly easy after awhile and she found it to be true.

She was certain, however, that when all was over, the sadness would come

crashing down on her like a tidal wave, suffocating and drowning.

Closing her eyes briefly, she forced the thought out of her mind and slipped her arm through Ginny's, following her and Ron across the Viaduct towards the Courtyard where everyone else was. The first wave of Death-Eaters had been more or less destroyed, and now Shackbolt had called for a respite before Voldemort came with the rest of his army. The only thing they had to escape was the Fiendfyre, which had not caught up with them.

For now, they were safe.

Everything else was a time-ticking bomb.

"I hate this," Ginny muttered, when the

three of them finally entered the courtyard. "This is the worst part of the war."

Hermione couldn't help but agree. It was a scene of devastation that greeted them. All around the Courtyard, people sat in huddles, their wands lit in a dim glow so that they could see in the dark. McGonagall, Flitwick, Slughorn, Arthur and Molly Weasley stood with several others, their wands raised as they chanted incantations to further strengthen the protections of the Castle, so that they could buy more time for everyone to recuperate. Several Healers dashed around, treating the severely wounded, while in the far corner huddled a small crowd of people as they paid their

respects to the deceased.

She saw familiar faces along with many other unfamiliar ones, people who smiled faintly and waved to acknowledge her, others who simply stared vacantly, their eyes blank with loss or fear. The D.A. had gathered in the middle of the Courtyard, talking in hushed whispers, while other members of the Order had joined them.

Then Hermione felt her gaze locking onto the group huddled in the distance. Blaise was seated on a wrecked boulder treating his own injuries, while Luna was trying to heal Theo's broken leg. Hermione's eyes widened and she turned to Ron so quickly she almost caught whiplash. "Where's Draco?"

Something flickered in Ron's eyes. "He's right behind."

Hermione spun round, searching for a familiar head of white blonde hair amidst the crowd of people leaving the Viaduct behind them. "Where?"

"He'll be here soon. Let's just wait with the others."

Reluctantly, Hermione allowed herself to be led off by Ginny, and was soon healing the other members of 17-65. Hermione considered herself lucky to be in a relatively good shape, thanks to Draco's earlier quick reflexes in the battle. Ginny and Ron, having used their brooms to fly, had escaped unscathed with minor cuts, bruises and burns. The others were pretty roughened up - apart

from Theo's broken leg, Luna's wrist was fractured, while Blaise had taken the brunt of two Crucios.

"I think we can win," said Luna optimistically, after a prolonged moment of silence, intermingled with the wails and cries of people surrounding them. "We seem to have far more people fighting on our side this time."

Theo chuckled almost mirthlessly. "Hate to piss on your parade, Luna, but the Dark Lord also has far more people fighting on his side this time. What you saw earlier was just a taste - call it a prelude, if you want - of what's to come. Hey, Pansy, what's wrong?"

The group turned to the black-haired witch, who had come limping over to the

group, her face tight and withdrawn. "Tracey's dead," she said quietly, settling beside Blaise who immediately wrapped his arms around her. "I didn't even - I mean, I just met her again."

"The D.A. isn't fairing too well," said Ginny, settling down on the ground next to Ron. "The Order's lost a couple of people here and there too."

"It's a war, Ginny." Ron's jaw was clenched. Hermione could see that it was taking him a huge effort not to look in the direction of his old schoolmates, to count how many there were left and how many who were no longer there. "People die all the time."

"Yes - but we've buried too many. Some we couldn't even bury at all."

Blaise tossed Ginny a phial, before passing two others to Ron and Luna. "This might help. Numbing potion," he explained, when they shot him a quizzical look. "Draco and I concocted it some time ago - well, that and the anti-disarming charm. This potion dulls your emotions while you're on the battlefield."

"It's what we drink to kill people," Theo quipped, with a wry smile.

"Or, in this case - to forget," Blaise assured Luna when she looked at Theo in alarm. "This isn't a time for mourning. We have to keep our grief at bay. Drink up."

Hermione faded out from the conversation. Her mind was still in a

whirl and she was worried sick for Draco, Neville and Harry, all of whom hadn't arrived yet. She knew that the others were also talking just to momentarily forget the devastation around them. Settling down on the boulder next to Luna, she kept her eyes trained on the stream of people entering the Courtyard. The crowd had thinned out, and almost everyone was gathered by now.

The Neville came running up, herding the last of the crowd into the Courtyard. He ran up to them, a streak of blood trickling from the side of his forehead, and crouched down to catch his breath. "It's done," he said breathlessly, "I blew up the Viaduct. I had to."

Hermione felt her heart plummet.
"What?"

"I - " and Neville's eyes widened as he noticed her pale face. "Oh, bloody hell, Hermione - "

"You blew up the Viaduct?" She repeated, her voice deathly calm. She was suddenly aware that everyone's eyes were trained on her as she got to her feet, slowly but steadily making her way towards the entrance of the Courtyard.

"Red?" Blaise's voice was guarded. Neville tentatively reached out for her. "Hermione, I'm so sorry - "

And now the blood was rushing to her ears as she stumbled forward, rushing past several crowds of people. She could barely see them in her peripherals,

but somewhere along the way, she noticed that she'd run past McGonagall and Ron's parents, and they were all reaching out to grab her. But they were all peripherals, and the only thing she focused on was that low archway that led to the now obliterated bridge.

She saw it at last - the dark looming bridge that was blown to bits somewhere in the middle. What was left on the other side was utterly charred, clear evidence of an infernal fire that had surged through and devastated everything in its path. And that was when it suddenly hit her, the frightening, irrevocable harsh truth of reality.

It destroyed her.

She was clapping a shaky hand over her

mouth before she could scream into the silence, but inside her head was nothing but screaming, long and painful and devastating. Then there were frantic sounds of people calling her name as she surged forward, heading for the dark hallway, but Ron's arms had tightened around her before she could get far.

"He'll be fine, Hermione!" Ron's voice was harsh, as if he was struggling to hold back tears of his own. "He'll be fine, you don't know yet. He could still be out there."

He pulled her towards him to wrap his arms tightly around her, and in the haze of tears she could see them all - Theo struggling up as Blaise and Luna pushed him down, Pansy, Ginny and Neville

running over to her with matching distraught looks on their faces. Most of the Order and some members of the Rebellion were also staring at the destroyed bridge, their eyes wide and faces solemn as they braced themselves for the worst.

Hermione ignored them all and kept her eyes trained on the empty bridge. "Come back to me," she whispered, her plea an empty echo in the tired wind. "Please come back to me."

Draco's disappearance into the crowd had only been the first of many trials and tribulations he had to endure within the next twenty minutes. It took him awhile to track down the Death-Eater who had started the Fiendfyre. It was Crabbe Senior, and Draco had no wish to kill the man, so he'd simply placed him under an Imperius curse.

He'd then ordered the Death-Eater to curb the Fiendfyre, while he took off running in the direction of the Viaduct, just behind the last group of people, who were being herded across the bridge by Neville. He was less than thirty feet

away from them, but the infernal flames had been catching up. If Crabbe Senior didn't stop the flames in time, they would consume him, and then the rest of the school.

There were two things that came to Draco's mind at that moment. The first was that he needed to survive. The second was that Hermione needed to survive.

The second overrode the first, and he was yelling at Neville before he could even process the implications of his request, his voice a sharp order in the tired wind and deafening flames. "Blow up the bridge!"

Neville paused in his stride, casting a horrified glance over his shoulder. "But

- "

"Now!"

Drawing in a reluctant breath, Neville held his wand out. "Reducto!"

A portion of the bridge disintegrated into rubble and Neville was forced to turn on his heels and run before the rest of the bridge collapsed under his feet. Draco watched as Neville dragged several people quickly across the other side, and then it was his turn, but the gap was daunting, to say the least.

And absolutely impossible to cross.

Still, he had to try. As the flames surged towards him, the heat of it almost scorching his back, Draco knew that there wasn't much of a choice. "Fuck it," he mumbled under his breath, before

sprinting the last few feet forward, hurling himself off the bridge.

It was almost like flying. For a moment, he felt himself hover in mid-air, in free fall, his legs dragged out in a perfect leap forward.

Then his hands were barely connecting with the cemented precipice on the other side, the jagged edges scraping the flesh off his palms as he slipped, and he was plummeting down the way Hermione had three years ago. The air was a blur as it rushed around him, and he could barely register what was happening, barely breathe, as he scrambled futilely for something, anything, to hold on to.

His lifeline came mid-fall - a hand came out of nowhere to latch onto his wrist,

and he felt a sharp, searing pain as the joint in his elbow tore with the action, but he gritted his teeth through the pain and glanced up.

"Potter?"

Harry grinned down at him. "Contrary to what you may think, Malfoy, you're not the Boy Who Lived, so don't ever pull a stunt like that again."

Draco was so relieved he couldn't think of anything to say. Instead, he dragged his other arm to the broom, hauling himself up while Harry maintained a firm grasp on him. He exhaled shakily once he was righted on the broom, feeling oxygen rush back into his lungs.

"How - " he rasped tiredly, once he had regained his breath. "How did you - "

"I was circling the area," Harry replied, as he flew them towards the Courtyard. "Couldn't see you with the rest of them, so I figured you'd gotten stuck out here somehow."

"And Hermione?"

"I saw Ron and Ginny bringing her across the Viaduct. She's safe," Harry assured him, and lowered the broom to the ground in a secluded corner of the Courtyard.

Draco vaguely registered the distant sounds of mourning and the distinct stench of blood. Dragging himself off the broom, he collapsed onto the ground, ignoring the cobblestones digging into his back in pointed edges, or the numbness in one of his arms.

"This is a one-off thing," he murmured, slowly peeling open his eyes to look at Harry, who had settled down on the ground beside him. "But thanks, Potter."

Harry grinned widely. "You're welcome. Now will you stop being such a prick?"

"Don't fucking count on it - " but his sentence was abruptly cut off when someone slammed into him, and he caught a faint rush of citrus that was purely Hermione, a mop of curls practically smothering him and arms wrapping tightly around his neck, and she was sobbing his name over and over and over again until he could barely make sense of the syllables.

"Hermione," he mumbled, shifting his head to press his lips to her neck,

propping himself up on his good elbow. He tasted the salt on her skin, the stench of blood in her hair, absolutely fitting at a time like this. "It's okay, I'm here now, I'm safe."

His voice was like a trigger to her and she slowly pulled back, rubbing the tears from her eyes furiously as she scanned his face searchingly. "I thought I lost you," she choked back a sob, "when Neville said he - he blew up the Viaduct - "

"I told him to."

"I just - I thought - "

He kissed her. Brusingly, painfully - like he was trying to make sure that she was real and he was finally able to breathe again. He desperately tangled his fingers

in her hair, dragging her down so that she was hovering over him.

And she kissed him back with fervent abandon, delving her slick, hot tongue into his mouth and clutching his face tightly between her hands. He tasted tears and blood on her lips, an ever-pressing reminder of the situation they were thrust into, but forgot all about it in the next instant, because Hermione Granger was a kind of aphrodisiac that one lost themselves in, the world could spin madly on but she was the epicentre of everything that mattered.

Hermione finally pulled back when Harry let out a discreet cough, but she continued to freckle swift kisses on Draco's face. "Merlin," she whispered

so softly that no one else could hear but him, "I love you."

His lips quirked in a wry smirk. "My name's Draco, actually."

Hermione laughed, in spite of the relieved tears still streaking down her face, and slowly helped Draco up. It wasn't until then that she noticed many curious eyes looking their way, but she could hardly care less. Reaching over Draco, she held out an arm to pull Harry into a hug. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Anytime, Hermione."

"Malfoy!" Ginny and Ron were running up, with the rest of the group following behind closely, matching expressions of sheer relief on all their faces. Theo was the first to hobble over, dropping down

on the ground and aiming a well-deserved punch on Draco's shoulder.

"You arse!" Theo's eyes were red-rimmed, despite the aggravated expression on his face. "Don't fucking scare us like that again!"

Then Ron and Ginny were threatening Draco in a similar way, while Blaise, who had seen the disjointed angle that Draco's elbow was turned in, hastily reached for his arm to heal him. Pansy was a shrieking mess as she hugged him, and Luna's thrilled smile seemed to light the whole atmosphere. Then Neville came up, looking rather shamefaced as he sat down on the ground, eyeing Draco with evident concern.

Draco noticed immediately, and he

nudged Neville. "Not your fault, Longbottom. If you didn't blow up the Viaduct, the fire would've spread over to the Courtyard."

"The fire's gone now," Luna mused, looking distantly in the direction of the ruined bridge.

"So it's just a waiting game from here on out?" Ron asked.

"Well, there's not much else we can do," Pansy pointed out reasonably. "I've no doubt that Voldemort's on his way over, and he's trying to break through the shields as we speak."

"Okay, do we have a plan?"

"We could try Disillusionment charms again," Ginny shrugged. "It's a sneaky attack - might keep us alive."

"So - Disillusionment charms until Neville or Harry gets to face off Voldemort?"

"Sounds good to me," Theo said, and the rest seemed to nod in agreement.

"Draco, what do you think?"

Draco hedged. He looked at Theo, who had posed the question, then at the rest of the group - Neville, Ron, Harry, Ginny, Luna, Blaise, Pansy. Their faces were expectant, drawn tight with anxiety. Then he turned to Hermione, and a flicker of realisation dawned on her face as she noticed the determined gleam in his eyes.

"That's the plan," he acknowledged at last, and slowly climbed to his feet, well aware of everyone's eyes on him, and

turned to Harry. "Except - you have to disarm me first."

Everyone paused in stunned surprise. Draco could practically hear the crackle of confusion in the air, and Blaise in particular looked like he was about to drive himself mad just trying to figure out the meaning of Draco's words.

"Me?" Harry was the first to break the silence, looking rather puzzled. "I don't understand."

In his peripheral vision, Draco noticed that the tension within the group had not gone unnoticed by the people around them. Shacklebolt, McGonagall and several other people slowly begin to head towards him, and he braced himself.

It was time.

"Because, in order to defeat Voldemort, you need the allegiance of the Elder Wand." Dragging a frustrated hand through his hair, Draco met Harry's gaze frankly and sighed. "And I am the Master of the Elder Wand."

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e x p e l l i a r m u s

Disarms opponent.

The silence that greeted him had never been louder before.

Draco looked down at the others, and apart from Hermione, the rest were all stunned into speechlessness, including the other people who had overheard their conversation.

Harry shifted, delicately breaking the

fragile silence and blinked at Draco. "You're the Master of the Elder Wand?"

"Do keep up, Potter," Draco frowned in faint irritation. "Yes, I'm the Master of the Elder Wand. Its allegiance has belonged to me for the past three years."

"Muffliato," Harry waved a dismissive hand to ensure that the conversation stayed between the group and turned back to Draco, pinching the bridge of his nose wearily. "Sit down, Malfoy. And explain from the very beginning."

Draco automatically narrowed his eyes, but sat down all the same, next to Hermione and Theo. He felt Hermione thread her fingers through his and held on tight, glad that there was at least one person who knew the truth and stayed

with him, regardless of what he did and his culpability in this war.

Letting out a lengthy sigh, Draco drew out the phials that hung around his neck and plucked one of them between his fingertips. "This phial was given to me by Snape, several days before he died. He wanted to have at least - someone, who knew what he went through, knew what he'd seen, knew what he had to do."

Ron's eyes widened with a flicker of recollection. "He showed Harry his memories too. We collected them from him right before he died."

Draco was surprised to hear this but simply shrugged. "In the memories he gave me, I saw that Voldemort was on a

quest for the Elder Wand, but it had all along been in the hands of Dumbledore. Until the night he died - because I had disarmed him."

An uncomfortable silence trailed in the wake of Draco's words, as some of them clearly remembered how Draco had intended to kill Dumbledore upon Voldemort's request years ago. It was all in the past, but Draco could still sense their animosity when this matter came up, and he hastily cleared his throat and continued.

"Anyway, it occurred to me that I had become the Master of the Elder Wand by disarming Dumbledore. Then I remembered that you," he threw a half-hearted glare at Harry, "had disarmed

me at the Malfoy Manor - "

"That's embarrassing," Theo mumbled, stifling a snigger. "Can't believe Potter beat you."

Draco rolled his eyes and cast a wordless Silencing charm on Theo before turning back to Harry. " - so then the allegiance of the Wand had shifted to you. It didn't matter to me - by then, I was fucking exhausted and the only reason I stayed with Voldemort was because he'd kill my parents if I didn't."

His hand instinctively tightened on Hermione's at the thought of his parents. Back then, he believed that staying would grant him and his parents full pardon. Truth be told, it didn't make a difference. Whether they stayed or left,

the Malfoys were completely dispensable to Voldemort. Everyone was.

"On the day of the final battle, after Crabbe died in the Fiendfyre," a flash of pain momentarily crossed his face at the mention of his friend, but it was over in the next instant and his face was expressionless once more as he looked at Harry. "I trailed you and watched you get cornered by Dolohov in one of the hallways."

"Dolohov?" Harry frowned. "I was never cornered by Dolohov."

"That's because you don't remember it," Draco returned flatly. "He cornered you and disarmed you. Then he Obliviated that portion of your memories, and I

believe he also inserted a false one when he was done. That's why you have no recollection of it."

Harry shook his head, clearly stunned by the turn of events. "I can't believe it."

"Shit," Blaise breathed, his mind working rapidly as he thought. "Draco, does this mean that Dolohov had been wanting possession of the Deathly Hallows since the battle?"

"I believe he knew about the Deathly Hallows," Draco hedged slowly, "I don't believe he actually wanted them until the battle was over. Because Dolohov was sent to disarm Harry on Voldemort's orders."

"How did he know that I was the Master of the Elder Wand in the first place?"

Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. "You were a fucking open book, you weren't skilled in Occlumency. I've no doubt that Voldemort managed to sift through your mind, find out that you knew that you were the Master of the Elder Wand. So he ordered Dolohov to disarm you."

Ginny raised a hand to stop Draco. "Well, why didn't he just disarm Harry himself?"

"Simple - he wanted Potter to fight him still believing that he had the wand's allegiance. Then Potter would face off with him without a single fucking clue as to what had happened, and wouldn't even know what hit him until he was lying dead on the ground."

"But Harry didn't die," Luna smiled, the only one apart from Hermione who was unperturbed by the news.

"Correct." Draco nodded at her and smirked as he remembered what happened after that. "Because I disarmed Dolohov before he could return back to Voldemort. And then I Obliviated his memory and inserted a false one, just like what he did to Potter."

"Bloody Slytherin," Ron shook his head, his lips twitching in amusement.

"And then I watched Voldemort disarm Dolohov, thinking that he was now the Master of the Elder Wand."

"Hold on - let me get something straight," Pansy stopped him, staring at him with her mouth open. "Are you

saying that all these years, Voldemort's been waving the bloody Wand about, thinking that its allegiance belonged to him?"

"He's had fun, hasn't he?"

"Are you fucking serious?" Theo broke out in a fit of laughter despite the tense atmosphere, prompting Hermione to start giggling along with him as she tried to stifle her laughter with the back of her hand. Even the rest looked rather amused now. "Classic Malfoy!"

Draco allowed himself to grin, but he soon straightened his face as he focused on the matter at hand, turning back to Harry. "I was going to return Mastery of the Elder Wand to you," he said, his voice quieter now. "But then you were

facing Voldemort before I could even find you. Neither of you had the Wand's allegiance, but Voldemort did have the Wand in his hand all along and so, naturally, he won."

Draco's words fell flat in the silence, as all of them were suddenly made aware of the repercussions of his actions. Had Harry been the Master of the Elder Wand, the past three years would've panned out completely differently. The Order would still be in existence, Hermione would've never been captured, and there would be no war.

One crafty Slytherin, one disarming spell, one wand - and everything had changed.

"So all these years, you've been using

another wand?" Neville asked curiously, looking at the discarded wand near Draco's feet.

Draco picked it up, feeling a faint pang of nostalgia sweep through him as he studied it. "My mother's. I don't have to be using the Elder Wand to be the Master of it. But I'm certain that I am - it's the reason why I created the anti-disarming charm in the first place."

"You know," Harry mused thoughtfully, "I can't say that you were in the wrong, Malfoy." Draco met his gaze in surprise and he shrugged. "If you didn't take the Wand's allegiance from Dolohov, Voldemort would've taken it. And I would've been dead by now."

"I know."

"So," Harry's lips lifted in a grin. "Are you willing to give up ownership?"

Draco let go of Hermione's hand and dragged himself to his feet, silently removing the anti-disarming charms on himself. Charms that he had created so long ago to prevent anyone - even Voldemort himself - from disarming him, so that he could retain ownership of the Elder Wand, until the time came for the Boy Who Lived to win.

The time was now.

He squared his shoulders and loosened his grip on his mother's wand. "Go ahead."

Harry quickly got to his feet, well aware that almost everyone in the Courtyard was watching the exchange between the

two, now that the Muffling charms had worn off. Taking a deep breath, Harry directed his wand at Draco.

"Expelliarmus!"

A blinding jet of light streaked out towards Draco, and he felt his grip on the wand loosening, before the wand was flying out of his hand. Harry caught it swiftly in mid-air, and then all was silent as everyone around them realised the gravity of the situation.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, was finally the Master of the Elder Wand.

Harry didn't move as he studied Narcissa Malfoy's wand. It felt reasonably compliant in his hand, and he looked over at Draco. "You know what's funny?" He said at last, tossing his own

wand over to Draco, who easily caught it. "That, I believe, belongs to you."

Draco's eyes widened as he recognised the familiar hawthorn-wood wand. He felt a faint rush of nostalgia. This wand had seen him through years of his teenage years, and he'd performed so many spells with it. "How the hell do you still have this?"

"From the skirmish at the Malfoy Manor years ago. I grabbed your wand away, and I've been using it ever since, even to fight Voldemort during the previous battle. Funny how our fates keep intertwining, huh, Malfoy?"

"For fuck's sake - "

A distant commotion cut Draco off mid-sentence, and the group turned, only to

see Shacklebolt and several members of the Order getting to their feet. The atmosphere was tense now, like the imminent storm that had hovered over their heads had finally arrived.

"They're here," Theo said, getting to his feet. His eyes were sharp and trained in the distance, and when Draco followed his line of vision, he saw what Theo had seen - the shield around the castle slowly disintegrating into vaporised mist.

The others quickly got up, and Draco tried not to let the taut apprehension show on his face as he quietly gave out directions. "Let's keep it simple. Keep the Death-Eaters at bay, take down whoever you can. And Potter will face

off Voldemort when he's ready."

The rest of them nodded in understanding, Neville in particular looking almost relieved that he wouldn't have to face Voldemort alone. There was a low hum of chatter, the shuffling of footsteps as the crowd around slowly prepared for what would be the final battle to end the terrifying war that had lasted for far too long.

Draco turned when he felt Hermione sidle up to him, a tiny smile playing on her face. She pushed herself up on the tips of her toes to seal a quick kiss to his lips before pulling back. In spite of the dried tears or the faint bruises clouding her face or the streaks of blood in her hair, he thought she'd never looked more

beautiful and alive before.

He couldn't help but think that there were repercussions of his actions three years ago, but within the mess he'd made, he had somehow found Hermione Granger - the light to his darkness, the angel to his inner demons, the pulse in his otherwise unfeeling heart.

She was all he could see, and her voice was all he could hear when she spoke. "Maybe, tomorrow, we'll finally be safe."

Maybe they would.

The first spell came out of nowhere exactly one minute after the shield had been taken down.

It was far too quick for anyone to counter - Hermione was standing with her friends one moment, her fingers intertwined with Draco's; but the next moment, she found herself being pushed behind Draco as he cast a powerful shield to protect all ten of them.

He was the only one swift enough to react, and they were far away enough to not take the brunt of the spell. Others were not as lucky, and she watched in horror as the spell exploded right into the crowd, sending several bodies and limbs flying in different directions, evidence that a Dark Spell had just been

cast, the first of many more to come. Then Shacklebolt was yelling for everyone to stand guard, while McGonagall was sending a spell back in the direction where it came from. And Hermione found herself thrust into the thick of war again as Death-Eaters flew overhead on brooms, hurling curses and hexes every which way. Draco and Theo were the first to snap into action, taking down Death-Eaters as swiftly as they appeared, and the rest soon joined in. But Hermione felt herself frozen on the spot. Her head was thrumming with screams and yells, but the moment she saw Katie Bell flung back against the wall nearby, her lifeless form slumping onto the ground as Ginny let out a

devastated cry, the oxygen was sucked out from her lungs again, a sickening emptiness churning in her stomach.

One down. She didn't think she could lose any more people today.

Blinking back the tears that sprung to her eyes, she whirled around and fired a spell at the Death-Eater that had killed Katie. Ginny soon joined her, and it wasn't long before the barrage of spells that they hammered at the Death-Eater took him down in one fell swoop.

Then they were forced to scatter as a wayward blast hurtled towards them, and Hermione found herself alone again. She locked her gaze on Luna some distance away, barely holding her own as she battled a burly Death-Eater. She

rushed forward, momentarily distracting the Death-Eater by firing a stunning spell his way. The Death-Eater turned to her, only to be taken unaware by a favourite spell of Luna's.

"Levicorpus!"

Hermione didn't hesitate to train her wand on the Death-Eater who was now dangled by his ankle in mid-air by an invisible rope. "Stupefy!"

The moment the Death-Eater fell to the ground in an unconscious heap, Luna turned to Hermione and smiled. "Thanks."

"No problem. Episkey." Hermione waved her wand to fix Luna's bloodied nose, and pulled the blonde witch back into the thick of battle. "Come on."

She and Luna weaved their way past people, firing spells to help arbitrary Order and Rebellion members along the way. Midway through, Luna went to help Theo, while Hermione ran over to Neville, who was single-handedly duelling two Death-Eaters. She fired a disarming curse at one, and he swiftly stunned both of them, smiling at her once the Death-Eaters were unconscious on the ground.

"Nicely done, Hermione - " but the words were ripped from his throat as a Cruciatus hit him in the back, and he fell over with a torturous yell.

"Mr Longbottom!" McGonagall was running over to him along with Professor Flitwick, but Hermione felt her breath

lodge in her throat as something in the Death-Eater's voice struck a chord in her memory.

Her fingers tightened on her wand as she strode forward. She could hear other people running up to provide reinforcements - everyone seemed horrified that Neville was being tortured in front of them. But she was quicker than any of them, the curse that slipped past her lips instinctive and powerful and vengeful.

"Flipendo!" The Death-Eater barely twisted out of the way to avoid her hex, but she was shouting another before he had the chance to recover. "Incendio!"

In her peripherals, she noticed that her duel had drawn the attention of the

people around them. The Death-Eater's mask fell off as he narrowly ducked, and she felt her blood boil as she came face to face with one of her captors.

Yaxley.

"Missed me, mudblood?" He sneered, drawing his wand on her. "Avada Kedavra!"

The spell missed her by a mere inch, the killing curse flying past her ear with a terrifying sizzle, but she flung another spell back quickly, a wordless Incarcerous that took him completely by surprise. Thick, black ropes wound around Yaxley's body, and she dragged him across the rubble towards her, kicking his wand far out of his reach.

Yaxley put up a fine struggle, but with a

twist of her wand, the ropes dug into his skin so tightly until he cried out in pain. "Going to kill me, mudblood?" He rasped.

Hermione considered his question and, at that moment, she realised how easy it was to disassociate herself from the situation. To let the three years of suffering morph into nothing but searing hatred, to let a simple curse slip past her lips. It was war - kill or be killed. People like Yaxley were better off dead anyway.

Avada Kedavra, Avada Kedavra, Avada Kedavra.

The words seemed incredibly easy to say, almost mellifluous on her tongue. "I can't." She whispered, digging her

wand to his temple. She really couldn't. The words simply refused to leave her lips, the magic for that curse simply refused to pulse through her veins. Shutting her eyes briefly, she pushed aside all the loathing she had for this pathetic excuse of a man in front of her. And when she opened her eyes, the air was far more breathable.

"Stupefy."

The arrival of the next wave of Death-Eaters had thrust Draco into the thick of battle, as he and Theo hammered spells

to knock the Death-Eaters off their brooms, forcing them to fight on level ground. Blaise and Pansy soon joined in, effortlessly dragging down three Death-Eaters in quick succession.

The Death-Eaters stumbled onto the ground, and they barely had the time to climb to their feet when Blaise trained his wand on them. "Immobulus."

His spell froze the Death-Eaters in their spot, and Draco promptly fired a spell at the one on the left. "Confringo," he murmured, sending the Death-Eater blasting back with a fiery explosion, just as Theo yelled a "Flipendo!" that sent the other Death-Eater hurtling back against a wall.

Pansy was quick to finish off the last

Death-Eater. "Petrificus Totalus!" She watched in satisfaction as the man fell over and smiled. "Good to see we haven't lost our touch."

Draco froze as he saw a pack of Death-Eaters heading towards them, their masks and robes making them indistinguishable from each other. "Hold on to that thought, Parkinson."

Theo quickly assumed position beside him, with Pansy and Blaise on Draco's other side. And it wasn't long before the four were shooting spells and deflecting them with adroit moves and quick reflexes. Draco could practically feel his blood humming, ears buzzing as he aimed curses with great precision - his blasting spells a direct counterattack

with Blaise's freezing ones, while Pansy's body-binding spells proved to be incredibly useful when Theo knocked back the opponents with jinxes.

"Hey, I have a question," Theo quipped, grinning as he fought the Death-Eaters off with wordless spells. "What're you guys doing tomorrow?"

"Shagging," Pansy replied sweetly. "If Blaise and I are still alive by then."

"Oh, Merlin, don't jinx it. I don't want to - Expulso! - have to go to your bloody funerals and write fucking eulogies and everything."

Blaise rolled his eyes. "Do you have to be so morbid, Theo?"

"Come on, Blaise, where's your sense of humour?"

"It's morbid humour - "

"Which is the best kind of humour." Theo chuckled, pausing to cast a hex before continuing, "you think Daphne Greengrass will be up for a thank-fuck-we're-alive shag later?"

"Thank-fuck-we're-alive shag?" Pansy shot him a dubious glance.

"Yeah," drawled Draco, who had been listening to the exchange with vague amusement, but had mostly been duelling and fending off curses for Theo, who tended to be sloppy at times. "To complement the fuck-the-world's-ending shag he had with Susan Bones yesterday."

"Bloody hell, Theo," Blaise shook his head. "Are you sleeping your way

through the D.A.?"

Draco smirked. "Apparently, he's also sleeping his way through Hufflepuff."

"What the fuck?" yelled Theo, amidst laughter from Blaise and Pansy. "When did I - "

"Susan Bones is from Hufflepuff, you daft git."

"Shit - " Theo swore, before shrugging the matter away. "Oh well, she was great. There's this thing she did, with her - oh, fuck!" He stopped abruptly, bringing his hands up as a wayward spell flew his way, only to have it blocked by Draco.

Draco shot him an aggravated look. "You were this close to missing the opportunity to have thank-fuck-we're-

alive sex with Greengrass."

"Oh, lighten up, Draco," he scoffed, before his eyes widened as he noticed another spell darting towards them, too quick and lethal to block. "Incoming!"

The spell was directed at Draco, and he barely had time to weave out of the way before the curse blasted a trail across the ground, leaving a rim of fire in its wake. Pansy, Blaise and Theo had all scattered, but several other people were not as lucky, and there were several cries of pain as they found their skin licked by the flames.

Draco knew exactly who had sent the spell before he even saw the person. Climbing to his feet, he braced himself and eyed Bellatrix, who was flanked by

several other Death-Eaters as she hexed her way through the crowd. Her laughter was maniacal, her mop of unruly hair and loud voice drawing the attention of the people around her.

"Draco, darling," Bellatrix grinned widely, flinging several people aside as she honed in on him. Theo, Pansy and Blaise were among them, and Draco watched furiously as she sent the three flying back with a frightening spell. "I've missed you."

Draco ducked past another spell and sent one hurtling right back at her. "I know, Auntie dearest. I could feel your filthy heart pining for me from miles away."

Bellatrix simply sneered. "You sicken me. Crucio!" Her voice rung loud and

clear, and Draco heard several gasps resonate around him as he rolled out of the way. The Unforgivables could never be blocked with a shield, and he hated how helpless he felt against them.

"Confringo!"

Bellatrix didn't even flinch as she blocked the spell, scorching several of the Death-Eaters beside her in the process. "Not an Avada?" She cooed, shaking her head at Draco with a menacing chuckle. "Such a pity, Draco. You've gone soft."

"Hardly." Draco deadpanned. "There are many ways to kill without an Avada. This, for instance," he shot a Diffindo that she deflected, but he hammered spell after spell as he spoke. "And this."

Explulso. "And this." Bombarda. "I prefer a wide variety, Auntie dearest."

"Oh, you really have to stop calling me that, Draco." Bellatrix flashed him a grin and shook her head, casting several Crucios which he easily evaded. "I know better than anyone else that you've never seen me as your Aunt. And the fact that you've so easily killed my husband and Rabastan tells me how much you disregard your bloodline. Except for, say - Andromeda?"

Draco was flinging a hex at her before he could even think. Red had clouded his vision, and his heart was suddenly frozen with fear as he thought of Andromeda and Teddy back home. No - they were safe. Grus had sealed up the

place, and they were hidden.

They were safe. They had to be, right?

Bellatrix cackled, clearly delighted at having gotten a reaction out of him. "I've touched a nerve, haven't I, Draco? I didn't mind when your mother died years ago, and I don't think I'd mind seeing the death of another one of my sisters - "

"Stupefy!"

The cry had come from a different source, this one taking Bellatrix by surprise, even though she deflected it easily. Draco turned, seeing Ginny standing a good distance away from him, her eyes flashing and stance fearless as she glared at Bellatrix.

"Oh, charming," Bellatrix laughed. "Potter's blood-traitor girlfriend. This

should be fun."

"Go to hell," Ginny spat, firing another stunning hex at her.

"Not without you!" Bellatrix sang, before aiming, "Crucio!"

Ginny barely evaded the spell. And then Draco and Ginny were keeping her at bay with a barrage of spells as she advanced towards them. Luna and Pansy soon joined in, while Blaise and Theo fought off a group of Death-Eaters some distance away with Neville.

But Draco's mind was elsewhere. He'd noticed a sudden change in the weather - the air seemed to have gotten stiller, a second calm before another tempestuous storm. The fighting was still in full force around him, but now that Bellatrix was

on the battlefield -

There he was.

Draco saw the figure in the horizon before anyone else did, leading a new wave of Death-Eaters in masks and robes. The man was a shade of ghastly grey amidst flyaway black robes as he strode towards the Courtyard. Voldemort and the rest of his army were still a good distance away, but Draco knew that it was time.

Neatly ducking from Bellatrix's curse, he held up his wand and shot a spell. "Periculum!"

Fiery crimson flares jetted out from the wand, shooting straight into the air about fifty feet above the ground, high up enough for everyone in the vicinity to

see it. The flares were an indication of the impending danger, and there was a sudden flurry around him as people began to realise that Voldemort had finally joined the battle.

Draco ducked another one of Bellatrix's spells and swerved past several people. "Theo!" He yelled, catching the attention of his friend some distance away. "Find Potter!"

Theo nodded and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Blaise and Neville to fend off the group of Death-Eaters alongside several other members of the Order. The momentary distraction was sufficient for Bellatrix to send a Dark spell his way, and Draco didn't even see it flying at him until he heard Pansy's

shrill scream.

"Draco! Watch out!"

He barely had time to put out a shield as the spell rammed right at him, throwing him off balance. The impact was deafening, blasting people left and right as Draco's shield absorbed the brunt of the curse. But he found himself flung across the Courtyard; his body slamming excruciatingly against the cobbled ground as he finally tumbled over.

The sounds of screaming were still ringing in his ears and he shook his head, coughing raggedly as he pushed himself to his feet, blinking away the dust from his eyes. It took awhile for his disoriented senses to get back on track, and when he did, he realised the

terrifying predicament he was in.
Voldemort was there - barely twenty-feet
away from him.

The Golden Trio had found themselves
in quite a fix.

Hermione had found them minutes after
defeating Yaxley, the two of them
cornered by several Death-Eaters in the
hallway adjacent to the Courtyard, and
she'd promptly joined in the fight. With
her defensive charms, Harry's accurate
disarming spells and Ron's brawlish
duelling, the Death-Eaters didn't stand a

chance.

But the next wave of Death-Eaters had arrived before they had a chance to recuperate and then it was another bout of non-stop duelling, stunning and disarming spells, twisting and ducking and weaving, a combination that left her gasping for breath, heart pounding erratically in her chest and limbs aching. "Flipendo!" She cast a knockback jinx on the Death-Eater closest to them, and it forced him to stumble back a couple of steps, his mask clattering onto the ground with the force of her spell. And then she found her heart leap to her throat as she recognised his face.

His gaze locked onto hers and in the next instant, he was hurling a spell her way.

"Crucio!"

Hermione yelped and barely scrambled out of the way, the spell whizzing by and grazing the tip of her ear. Beside her, Harry and Ron had paused in shock at the sudden use of an Unforgivable, and then their eyes narrowed as they noticed Walden MacNair standing several feet away from them.

Both Harry and Ron began hammering several stunning curses in quick succession, but MacNair was a swift one and he swerved away with great expertise, forcing the other Death-Eaters to take the brunt of their spells instead.

With a furious look on his face, Harry took aim and cast a potent disarming spell. "Expelliarmus!"

MacNair's wand flew out of his hand and into Harry's; then Hermione was directing a hex at the defenceless man. "Immobulus!"

MacNair froze in place, and Ron took the opportunity to finish him off. "Stupefy!" He yelled, watching in great satisfaction as the Death-Eater was flung back and collapsed in an unconscious heap.

The three worked to take down the last two Death-Eaters with ease, and when they were done, Hermione turned to Harry and Ron with a grateful smile. "Thanks."

"Are you kidding?" Ron grinned. "It was our pleasure."

"Yeah. I've been wanting to do that ever

since I saw your memories," Harry added, before heading towards a hidden archway to check the wound on his leg.

Hermione quickly brought out potions to heal him and Ron, smiling the latter grumbled away when she fixed his injuries; though she couldn't help but notice that Harry was silent throughout. And Ron, who was usually insensitive to these kinds of things, also began to take notice. "Everything alright, mate?"

"Just - " Harry stopped, tiredly running a hand through his hair, " - terrified, I guess."

Hermione shuffled over to sit beside him, with Ron on his other side. "It's okay to be scared," she said quietly. "It's a war. It's okay to be scared all the

time."

"You've got this, though," Ron interjected. "You're now the Master of the Elder Wand, Voldemort has no more Horcruxes left, there's nothing else standing in the way."

"I know. It's just - I already lost to him once. Just thinking about losing to him again is enough to drive me crazy."

Hermione shot Ron a fleeting glance over Harry's bent head, and reached into her satchel. "Maybe this'll help," she drew out a tiny phial, surreptitiously peeling off the label on it and placed the phial in Harry's hands. "Drink up."

"What is it?"

"Felix Felicis." She smiled when his eyes widened. "Better known as liquid

luck."

Harry cast her an unsure glance, but when she nodded, his jaw clenched and he popped the lid on the phial. He downed it in a single gulp, eyes bright with newfound determination and nodded. "Okay, let's go."

Hermione and Ron slowly followed Harry out onto the battlefield again, but she lingered behind when Ron nudged her. "Was that - "

"Fake?" Her lips curled in a faint smile. "Absolutely. It's actually a blood-replenishing potion, but he doesn't need to know that."

Ron's eyes gleamed and he chuckled. "You know, Harry once tricked me into winning a Quidditch game by pretending

to add Liquid Luck into my drink. And now, you're doing the same to him. Guess some things never change."

Hermione smile began to widen in response and she turned to follow Harry and Ron down the steps. But someone had come running through the crowd, and she gaped when she saw Theo, his face full of grime and face streaked with blood. "Potter!" Theo yelled, stumbling up to them when he saw the Trio. "Voldemort's here - " Harry's eyes widened, and so did Ron's and Hermione's. " - along with the rest of his army. It's time. Come on!"

Harry and Ron immediately followed Theo, surging frantically through the crowd to face off Voldemort, but

Hermione faltered when she heard a sharp scream in the distance.

"Draco!" It was Pansy who had yelled a warning. "Watch out!"

Hermione's head whipped round, her eyes barely latching onto the blonde wizard before she watched as a spell slammed right into him. She felt her heart plummet when he was flung far across the Courtyard, the force of it exploding towards everyone who stood in the way, until he was a convoluting mess on the rubble, barely able to drag himself back onto his feet.

"Draco," the whisper was a painful breath on Hermione's tongue, and it was agonising. Like something had been ripped out of her chest and she was left

empty, bereft, without.

Bellatrix was cackling wildly as she stood in the middle of the battlefield, delighted at the spell she had blasted at her nephew. "One down," Hermione heard Bellatrix say, as she advanced towards Pansy and Ginny, a grin playing on her lips. "Two to go!"

True to her reputation, Bellatrix was every bit the lethal duellist everyone knew she was. Pansy and Ginny were bloody and barely surviving, but hardly anyone else dared to join in the fight, because she flung away any outsiders just as quickly as they stepped towards her.

Hermione reached into her satchel, her fingers latching around the Cloak of

Invisibility and pulled it on without a second thought. She swiftly headed towards Bellatrix as spells whizzed past her and she remained unscathed under the Cloak, her eyes focused on the battle a good distance away from her. Bellatrix was chuckling as the three girls missed their target again and again and again, and with a wave of her wand, she sent Pansy slamming back against the ground several feet away.

"Two down!" Bellatrix sang, as Ginny let out a furious cry. "Two to go - "

"Levicorpus!" Luna was firing a spell at her, only to have it easily deflected, while Ginny shot another futile one.

"Stupefy!"

"Is that the best you can do?" Bellatrix

laughed, shaking her head at the two girls. "How disappointing. Now you," she deflected Luna's hex and directed her wand at the blonde witch. "Maybe after this, you'll really belong to St. Mungo's. Crucio!"

Luna was slow to evade and dropped to her knees, doubling up in sheer agony. Somewhere in the distance, Hermione heard Theo frantically shout Luna's name, and then he was pushing his way through the crowd in an effort to get to her.

"And as for you - " Bellatrix smiled widely as she turned to Ginny, the last one standing. Hermione had almost reached Bellatrix and she was praying that Ginny could hold her own until she

got there. " - blood-traitor! How many Weasleys do you think will be left once this battle is over?"

Ginny was shaking with fury as she faced Bellatrix. "Stupefy!"

"You and the rest of your family will go out with a bang. Avada Kedavra!"

There was a chorus of gasps as Bellatrix's voice rung clear and loud amidst the chaos. Ginny had escaped the killing curse by a hairsbreadth, scraping her knees terribly in the process. There was a loud scream as Molly Weasley shoved her way through the crowd, her face a vibrant red that matched her hair.

"Not my daughter, you bitch!" Molly shrieked, flinging a fierce spell at Bellatrix. Several people stepped

forward to help her, but she waved them away. "Stand back! She's mine!"

"Oh, now Mummy's joined the fight too!" Bellatrix cried in delight, "how wonderful!"

Hermione watched as Harry ran over to help Ginny up, pulling her and several others away from the line of fire. But she advanced steadily, heart thrumming in her ears and wand tight in her grasp.

"You will not hurt my family again!" Molly said determinedly, hammering Bellatrix with a series of blasting spells that the other witch easily deflected. Hermione was forced to use a Protego to protect herself from being flung back by the strength of Molly's magic.

"We'll see about that." Bellatrix returned

ominously, her black eyes flashing with thinly-veiled amusement. "Avada Keda -"

But Molly hit her square in the chest before she could finish the spell. It was a spell that Hermione hadn't ever seen before - it turned her to stone, her face draining of all colour and her twisted robes curled and unmoving. Bellatrix wasn't even breathing; her eyes were wide and frozen, but completely devoid of emotion.

Hermione took the last step closer, simultaneously throwing the Cloak off her as she directed her wand at Bellatrix's back. She remembered a conversation from a long time ago, about how the war had torn Andromeda's

family apart, how Nymphadora had died by Bellatrix's hand, and so had Theo's father, and countless other people. How Draco and so many others wanted that golden opportunity to kill the woman who had caused nothing but bloodshed her entire life.

Now here she was, standing mere inches away. And Hermione realised that she couldn't let Theo, or Draco, or Molly Weasley, or anyone else in the world add more red to their ledger for someone who wasn't even worth it.

So add it to her own.

It was that thought alone that enabled her to whisper a single incantation under her breath. "Reducto."

And Bellatrix Lestrange splintered into a

million fragments.

Everything else had drowned out when Draco's gaze had locked with Voldemort's.

There was nothing else he could hear - not the screams, not the flurry of spells, not the blasts of explosions. All he heard was his mother's voice ringing in his ears:

I made my choice. I'm afraid, but this is what I have to do.

He knew that he needed to face off Voldemort, if it meant buying time for

Theo to find Harry. Only Harry could end this. But he needed to keep Voldemort distracted in the meantime, so that no one else would die by his hand.

The people around him were still fighting off the new wave of Death-Eaters that had arrived, but he could feel various frightened glances cast his way. McGonagall was nearby duelling two Death-Eaters, watching Draco from the corner of her eyes in evident concern. So was Ron and his brother George, as they battled several Death-Eaters with other members of the Order.

Dragging in every bit of his strength, he pulled himself up, spitting out a mouthful of blood and mindlessly mumbling a healing spell under his breath to snap his

wrist back into place. Then he turned to face Voldemort, his jaw clenched and shoulders squared.

"Draco." Voldemort's voice was chilling. His eyes were narrowed in serpentine slits, his face a greyish-pale that made him seem devoid of life, his skin almost translucent in the early rays of sunlight. "We meet again."

Draco smirked briefly, ignoring the blood that dribbled down his chin.

"Missed me?"

"I must say I'm impressed. You've actually managed to deceive me for years. If you hadn't been so careless about attacking the Ministry, I never would've suspected you."

"You're getting sloppy, my lord," Draco

sneered, bracing himself when Voldemort's thin lips pursed in evident fury. A terrifying green light flew straight at him as Voldemort fired a killing curse. But Draco had pre-empted it and spun out of the way in good time, his smirk widening as he escaped unscathed. "You're really getting sloppy."

"I see you've gotten rid of that curse in your arm," Voldemort remarked, calmly firing more spells, forcing Draco to throw himself on the ground in a frenzied attempt to avoid them.

Ignoring his bloody palms and gaping wounds, Draco cast a swift glance around - where the hell was Potter? - before climbing to his feet again. "Oh, yeah. That was a splendid connection

we shared, by the way. Really felt your love for a moment there - "

He was cut off when Voldemort fired another barrage of spells at him. This time, a Dark spell caught him right in the stomach, and Draco felt two of his ribs crack with an excruciating snap. There were gasps from the onlookers, and some of them stepped forward to help - Ron included, but a wide-ranged spell from Voldemort blasted them back.

Then the spells abruptly stopped, and he struggled to catch his breath while Voldemort watched him with evident satisfaction in his agony. "Just like your father," Voldemort's voice was eerily calm. "Weak. That's why I had to kill him."

His words kicked the air out of Draco's lungs. "What?"

"Lucius was a disgrace on the battlefield. I knew his allegiance never fully lay with me - not even when he had killed your mother in front of me. So I had to get rid of him - the both of you - on a particular mission. The only reason why I kept you alive was because I thought you had managed to cut off any weak emotions you felt for your parents. Evidently, I was wrong - "

"Confringo!" Draco yelled, cutting him off mid-speech with a powerful blast. The blood was roaring in his ears and he felt a searing, blinding hatred for the man standing in front of him. Both his parents - dead. By this man's hands.

Onlookers be damned, Draco dragged himself up and fired another curse at him.

"You're a disappointment." Voldemort deflected his curse, sending another one back at him. "Weak." Another curse. "Pathetic." And another, and finally sent Draco tumbling back onto the ground. "I turned you into a lethal weapon, Draco, and you can't even utter a simple killing curse. Finishing you off would be so easy - "

Voldemort drew back his wand and sent another blinding Dark spell whizzing towards him, and Draco braced himself, too weak to deflect anything else.

"Protego Totalum!"

The spell crashed in a blistering light

against the powerful protective shield that someone cast over him. Hermione. He recognised her voice no matter where she was, but when he feebly raised his head to look for her, she was nowhere in sight.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. With another silent spell, Draco heard Hermione scream as she was flung several feet away from him. She collapsed in a bloody heap, the Cloak of Invisibility falling off, making her vulnerable to his next attack.

"Hermione!" Her name was ripped from Draco's throat as he watched several people hurry towards her, her figure small and frail and distant, too far for him to reach.

And Merlin, he was terrified.

This was what fear really felt like. It was having Hermione Granger, the one person that mattered the most to him, being taken away. It was watching her struggle to inhale a next breath that would or would not come. It was reaching out for her, his fingers clawing against the rubble beneath him as he tried to drag himself over, knowing all the while that he could never reach her in time.

"Love makes people weak," Voldemort said simply, turning away from Draco and taking a step towards Hermione, who was hastily being dragged away by Ron. "Avada - "
"Riddle!"

Harry's voice was a furious roar above the frightened screams and muffled whimpers of the crowd. The crowd instinctively parted for him. Harry's eyes were flashing in anger as he held his wand out, his gaze darting first to Hermione's battered form and then to Draco's bloodied one. His jaw clenched in determination, shoulders squaring with a kind of bravery that he never once lacked.

"Ah, Harry Potter." Voldemort's thin lips curved as he saw his old nemesis stand in front of him once again. "Have you come to be defeated by my hand once more?"

"It's just you and me again, Riddle," Harry said calmly, but only those who

knew him well could hear the slight tremble in his voice. "And this time, the war will end at your demise."

Voldemort seemed amused as he circled Harry, like a predator eyeing its prey, ever ready to pounce and rip to shreds. The crowd was deathly silent - Death-Eaters and Order members and Rebellion alike were all watching the exchange with breathless fixation. Draco felt Theo haul him over where Blaise and Pansy were. Opposite, Hermione was leaning tiredly against McGonagall, with Ron, Ginny, Luna, Neville and the rest of the D.A. members. There was nothing but the sound of Harry and Voldemort's voices as they spoke, the scuffing of rubble beneath their feet and

the timid whimper of the wind.

"Tell me, boy," Voldemort's voice was a vacant sort of quiet, the kind that sent shivers down one's spine. "How will you attempt to end me this time?"

"You're all alone, Riddle," said Harry. "Your army is outnumbered. Blaise Zabini, Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott have left your army to join the side of light. Your top Death-Eater, Draco Malfoy, has played you like a fool - " Voldemort's eyes flashed dangerously at that, but Harry calmly continued. " - Bellatrix Lestrange is dead. And the Death-Eaters you've trusted the most have been plotting against you for three years."

A ripple of surprise swept through the

crowd at Harry's words. Even Voldemort looked momentarily surprised, and Harry's gaze sharpened as he noticed the fleeting second of human emotion in the other man.

"Shall I spell it out for you, Riddle?" Harry took a step forward. "For three years, a group called the Peverells have been searching for the Deathly Hallows. They found the Resurrection Stone. They almost stole the Cloak of Invisibility. And the last - the Elder Wand - was never far. I believe it's in your hands as we speak. They would've killed you eventually, Riddle, to gain Mastery of the Elder Wand."

Voldemort's snake-like eyes swept across the crowd in search for his

traitors and, after a few seconds, landed on a tall man standing at the edge of the crowd. The last member of the Peverells. Antonin Dolohov paled as his eyes met Voldemort's, and then he was wrenching away, almost tripping over himself in an attempt to run.

Before anyone else could react, Draco lifted his wand and sent a blasting spell hurtling at Dolohov. The Death-Eater slammed back against the wall as the flames scorched his robes, before collapsing in an unconscious heap on the ground. He was promptly incarcerated by Shackbolt and several other members of the Order.

Draco smirked when he noticed Harry's amused gaze and Voldemort's angry one

on him. "You're welcome."

Harry shook his head in silent mirth and turned back. "Do you see it now, Riddle? You're all alone. With no horcruxes left, you're just a man. You are weak, just like the rest of us."

"We shall see about that," Voldemort returned evenly, directing his wand at Harry. "When you are lying a shattered corpse on the floor, then we shall see which of us wields more power. You were fortunate to have people sacrifice their lives for you three years ago, Harry Potter. You were fortunate to have survived. Not this time."

"That's where you're wrong," Harry said simply. "Once again, you mistakenly believe that you are the Master of the

Elder Wand."

Voldemort laughed; a distorted, inhuman sound that terrified everyone around him. "I believe that mistake was yours, Harry Potter, you foolish boy."

"Yes, that was my mistake when I went to fight you the first time," Harry's voice was quiet now, a hushed mellow against the echoes of Voldemort's grating laughter. "You see - I thought that I was the Master, and therefore, I thought there was no reason for me to lose. I didn't know that you had read my mind, and had gotten Antonin Dolohov to disarm me, before disarming him yourself so that you could be its Master. But what you didn't know was that Draco Malfoy had disarmed Dolohov before you could."

The truth is - Draco Malfoy was the true Master of the Elder Wand since the previous battle, and he has remained the Master ever since!"

A startled murmur rippled through the crowd at Harry's revelation, and Draco suddenly felt hundreds of eyes on him. Voldemort's gaze was furious and frightening, his silted nostrils flaring with barely-concealed wrath, his lips flattened in a vengeful line.

"But his Mastery has since ended," Harry's words sliced through the hushed whispers, making everyone fall silent once more. "Because I disarmed him several hours ago. So it all comes down to this - " his voice had dropped to a whisper; only those close enough could

hear it. "I am the new Master of the Elder Wand."

Voldemort did not wait one moment longer. With a furious roar, he drew the Elder Wand back, pointing it right at Harry Potter. His stance was unrelenting, eyes frigid with glacial fury as he screamed, "Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!" Harry held Narcissa Malfoy's wand out to deflect the spell, a newfound power surging within him as his disarming spell collided with Voldemort's killing curse.

The green and red jet of lights clashed in a vibrant, terrifying display of magic. The impact was drowning, the blast like a cannon bang that reverberated across the ruined walls. Draco found himself

instinctively putting up a wordless shield to protect himself and the others behind him from the frightful flares emanating from the spells; while several other people did the same to prevent anyone else from getting hurt.

Then, amidst the whirl of golden flames that exploded and enveloped them, the green light abruptly ceased as the Elder Wand flew out of Voldemort's hand and towards Harry. Reaching out with one swift hand, Harry caught the Elder Wand deftly, just as Voldemort swayed on his feet for a full second before falling backwards. His thin, grotesque body collapsed onto the floor, his slit-like eyes vacant and empty, his skin translucent with the pallid colour of

death in the early rising sun, his robes fluttering about in the dry wind.

Tom Riddle was dead.

And Harry Potter had won.

The silence that followed was deafening, as everyone stared at Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, standing several feet away from Voldemort's corpse. Harry was breathing hard, his eyes wide as he registered the magnitude of what he had just done. He blinked, and that action alone triggered the crowd into action, a bubble of disbelief and sheer happiness with the knowledge that the war was finally over.

Hermione found herself wrenched forward by Ron as he dragged her towards Harry. Ginny was the first to

reach him, skipping over Voldemort's corpse as she flung her arms around her boyfriend. And then Ron was yelling excitedly as he hugged Harry, and Hermione was breathless with relieved tears and smiles as she wrapped her arms tightly around her friend.

The rest soon followed - D.A. members, the Order, the Rebellion, friends, family, complete strangers. There were congratulatory pats and thankful yells and ecstatic cheers, a wonderful medley that Hermione simply couldn't get enough of.

The war was over.

She was safe. Draco was safe. They were all safe.

Safe.

Choking back a happy sob, she brushed her hand across her teary cheeks and lifted her head. She saw Draco standing a good distance away from the rest, with Blaise, Pansy and Theo beside him, looking satisfied with the victory but careful to stay apart from the celebrations and overall merriment.

Across the crowd, above the noise, Draco's gaze locked on hers. And she smiled.

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Mends broken objects.

"Lumos."

A dim glow emanated from the tip of the wand, bathing the room in a slow, warm glow. Hermione dragged in a deep breath and pulled herself upright, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the darkness in the room. She had awoken just several minutes ago, with her heart pounding, a scream lodged in her throat

and tears prickling the corners of her eyes.

This wasn't anything new. She had dreamed of the Peverells tonight - their Death-Eater masks glinting in her subconscious as they breathed down Cruciatus curses on her. The nightmare had triggered the pain so sharply she swore she could almost feel it, feel all the bruises and the aches and the gashes on her skin. And Draco's voice as he called out her name repeatedly in search for her - it was a distant echo in her ears now.

"The war's over," she whispered, her words a tired rasp in the silence. "It's over. I'm safe."

In the aftermath of the war, these words

had quickly become a mantra - not only for her, but for everyone else. The rest of 17-65 had moved in, and Andromeda was more than happy to clear out rooms to accommodate everyone. Draco and Theo had voiced the most complaints, but the bottomline was that there was an unvoiced agreement with all ten members:

17-65 had fought the war together.

Now they were going to face the aftermath together.

So in the days that followed, it wasn't an uncommon sight to see each of them facing their fears in different ways. Neville breaking down in a fit of silent tears as he rocked Teddy to sleep. Luna sitting on the front steps staring blankly

at the night sky. Theo with a bottle of Firewhisky in his hand as he paced the porch. Pansy's werewolf form howling up at the moon. Blaise whipping up batch after batch of potions just to keep his mind active. Ginny's screams that could practically wake the whole neighbourhood. Ron working off his frustration by casting hex after hex on a dummy. Harry's extended bouts of silence where he locked himself in a room for hours on end.

There were nights when Draco awoke with the beginnings of the killing curse at the tip of his tongue, and there were other nights when she awoke with his arm so tightly wound around her waist she could barely breathe. There were

mornings when she found him by the Pensieve, and there were other mornings when he joined her in the shower. Sometimes, in the haze of their post-orgasmic bliss, she couldn't be sure if the streaks across his cheeks were rivulets of water or tears.

The war was over, but the ghosts were still haunting.

And Hermione thought that they would never quite fade away.

She glanced up when the door opened with a creak. And then Draco was stepping in, shutting the door gently. He paused when he noticed her sitting up in bed and, with a worried frown that creased his forehead, he crossed the room and settled down next to her.

"Nightmares?"

She hummed in acknowledgement and kissed him back when he captured her lips. His tongue delved into her mouth with ease, slick and thrilling and comforting all at once. His thumb came up to brush the wayward teardrop that had slid down her cheek, and she let out a throaty whimper, sliding her fingers into his soft blonde hair.

"The Peverells," she mumbled, after he pulled back from her.

He nodded, and sponged gentle kisses down the bridge of her nose. "They're gone now."

"I know."

"You're safe."

"We're safe," she corrected, lifting her

palm to his cheek. "Did you use the Pensieve?" Pain momentarily flashed in his eyes, and she knew at once that he'd seen her memories. The memories belonging to the phial Pansy had made a long time ago, containing all the details of Hermione's years in captivity. Draco had heard it all from Hermione, but it was evident that seeing it was a different matter altogether. "How were they?"

"Painful," he returned simply, "you're the strongest person I know."

She smiled then, angling her head to press a kiss to his jaw. "Thank you for finding me."

"Thank you for not giving up on me," he returned quietly, before pulling her back down onto the bed with him, his arms

looping lazily around her waist. "Sleep, Granger."

She turned off the light on the wand with a wave of her hand, and shut her eyes, lacing her fingers tight through his.

"Goodnight, Draco."

The Great Hall was a flurry of dust and grime, a result of the repair work that had been going on for the past few days. Hermione watched as people, strangers and familiar faces alike, cleared out the filth from the place, swept out the collected rubble and cemented the dilapidated walls.

Andromeda was across the hall with McGonagall, three other professors, and several other people, their heads bent in deep discussion, while Arthur Weasley was giving out orders in a calm voice. The remaining members of the D.A. sat on the ground in a huddled circle, with Teddy on Cho Chang's lap as she cuddled the happy toddler.

Ginny stepped up next to Hermione, shaking her head in slight wonder. "Feels like a lifetime ago since I last stepped into this Hall."

Hermione nodded in agreement, before glancing over at Draco and Theo, who were already striding halfway down the hall in an arrogant fashion - a typical gait that she vaguely recalled seeing

from Draco in the past - before proceeding to search for something amidst the arbitrary pile or rubble and overturned tables.

"What the hell are they looking for?" Ron asked in curiosity, as he watched the two blast a pile of rubble away, rummaging through broken pieces of furniture beneath it.

"The Slytherin table," Hermione replied, an amused smile curving her lips.

"Are you serious? How are they even going to find it? There are about a dozen tables here!"

Blaise chuckled as he stepped up next to Hermione. "Draco had our table marked. The usual bunch of us always hogged the same table - no other Slytherin could sit

there without his permission."

"Bloody Malfoy always wanting his bloody way," Ron mumbled beneath his breath, as the rest of them laughed when they overheard him.

After awhile, Draco was dragging Theo back, a look of utter dismay on the latter's face as they headed back to the group. "It's gone!" The expression on Theo's face was so mournful that Hermione badly wanted to break out in another fit of giggles. "Our table's gone!" She sympathetically patted him on the back, despite the fact that her lips were twitching. Hagrid came in at that moment, lugging a huge rectangular table under his arm with ease, and he grinned widely when he spotted the group.

"Have yer tried sittin' at this new one?"

"Who's it for, Hagrid?" asked Harry.

"For everyone, o' course. McGonagall's new rule. No house separation, an' anyone can sit anywhere they like."

He marched off happily, leaving a surprised silence in his wake. "No!"

Theo gaped after him, an appalled look on his face. Draco, Hermione noticed, didn't look too happy either, but was wise enough to keep his mouth shut.

"Are you saying that if there aren't enough seats to go round, I might find myself stuck with a Hufflepuff - or worse, a Gryffindor?"

"Hey!" Ginny scowled half-heartedly.

"Five out of ten of us are Gryffindors!"

"Actually - " Pansy began wickedly, only

to have Theo shoot a frosty glare in her direction as he clearly recalled the Sorting Hat putting him into Gryffindor the second time he wore it.

"Come on, Theo," Luna said cheerfully, when the group slowly began to head towards the table that Hagrid had placed in the middle of the hall, leaving behind Theo, who refused to budge. "Maybe you can mark this table."

Theo was immediately convinced, and quickly went along with her. The table was still sandy with dust and Blaise performed a quick Scourgify on it before everyone took a seat. Hermione automatically sat herself down next to Draco, with Theo on his other side, and Pansy and Blaise on her side. Harry was

directly opposite her, with Ginny and Neville on his right, Ron and Luna on his left.

"I think this is great," Neville sounded pleased as he gazed around the hall with evident satisfaction. "Maybe there'll be far less house rivalry from now on."

"Don't count on it, Longbottom," Draco deadpanned. "If I could scrape together a Slytherin Quidditch team, we'd be wiping the floor with your Gryffindor arses before you can even spell Quidditch."

"Is that a challenge, Malfoy?" Harry's eyes had lit at the mention of Quidditch, "because you're most definitely on."

"Deal. Granger, shake Potter's hand for me."

The group laughed as Hermione rolled her eyes and grasped Harry's hand in place of Draco. They were still laughing when a shadow fell upon the table, and they glanced up, eyes widening when they saw McGonagall approaching them. "Professor!" Hermione greeted, with a wide smile. She was the only one who jumped up to hug McGonagall - even Harry and Ron held back; and while the new Headmistress of Hogwarts was startled with her affectionate behaviour, she looked rather pleased, returning Hermione's hug briefly.

"It's lovely to see the lot of you getting along so well," McGonagall said, smiling pleasantly at the group, purposely ignoring the doubtful coughs

from Ron and Theo. "But I've come to talk to you about a separate matter - regarding the reopening of Hogwarts."

"What is it, Professor?" Ginny asked curiously.

"Well, as you know, Hogwarts will have a new influx of students for the new term. I've been more than impressed with all of your skills and I'd be more than happy to have some of you on board as teachers for the new cohort."

Her words were met with a stunned silence as each of them tried to register the unexpected news. "Really?" Blaise was the first to break the silence, a frown creasing his forehead. "But none of us have taken our NEWTS."

"I understand that. And if any of you

would be interested in sitting for your NEWTS, the doors of Hogwarts will always be open to you. But when it comes to hiring new staff, Albus had never used grade qualifications as a yardstick, and I intend to do the same. You've all proved your abilities on the battlefield, and that's already a good-enough indicator."

Blaise nodded in understanding, but the sudden flicker of intrigue in his eyes was telling, and McGonagall smiled when she saw that the look on Pansy's face matched his.

"Mr Zabini, I see that you and Ms Parkinson are expressing some level of interest in it. If you'd like to take me up on my offer, do feel free to Owl me.

Hogwarts is acceptable of anyone and everyone, even lycanthropes," she added intuitively.

Pansy's stoic expression quickly crumpled, and she gazed at McGonagall with gratitude lacing her features. "Professor - "

"One of the best Professors Hogwarts ever had was a lycanthrope. I have no doubt you will be a wonderful teacher too," she smiled at Pansy, gently reaching over to pat the girl on the arm, before pulling back and nodding at Blaise. "You too, Mr Zabini."

McGonagall left soon after, and Blaise glanced round at the table. "Are the rest of you going to take McGonagall up on her offer?"

"I'm afraid not," Harry shook his head almost reluctantly, with a shrug. "Remember how Shacklebolt approached all of us the other day about the Auror programme at the new Ministry? Ron and I were considering saying yes."

"Yeah, me too," Neville chimed in.

"Same here," Theo added, before scowling at the looks of surprise at his unexpected response. "What, I can't be an Auror?"

"Of course you can," Luna was the first to chime in her support.

"You're going to be a great Auror," Hermione nodded in agreement, followed by the rest at the table. It was true - Theo didn't have the same strict

moral compass that Harry, Ron and Neville possessed. But she knew that this was what would make him different, in the best way possible. She knew he would uphold his own brand of justice, risk his life for the people and things that mattered.

Draco was the only one who didn't say a word, but the brief pat on Theo's back spoke louder than anything he could say, and Theo knew that very well. "By the way," Draco added, with a lazy smirk, "you do know that you can't shag the people you're assigned cases to, right, Theo?"

"Are you fucking serious?" Theo yelled, eyes rounding in obvious distress. He clearly hadn't heard of this, but one look

around the table and he was relenting. "Fine." He mumbled in resignation, before nudging the blonde-haired witch sitting opposite him. "What about you, Luna? What're you planning to do after this?"

"I don't know," Luna said breezily, absentmindedly playing with her Dirigible plum-earrings. "I'm thinking I might go on a quest to find the Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

"What the fuck is that?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm going to find it." Theo's eyebrows knitted, but when he wisely kept his mouth shut, she smiled warmly at him before turning to the red-head witch sitting several spots away from her. "What about you,

Ginny?"

Ginny shrugged, smiling as she thought about the future and the possibilities it held. "Quidditch, probably. I've always had an interest in that. But I'm keeping my options open."

"That's good," Draco replied smoothly, a wicked gleam in his eye. "You should keep them open when you're considering Potter as a relationship partner as well." Unfazed, Harry simply shot him a calm smile. "Hermione should do the same too."

Hermione burst out laughing, hastily slapping a hand over her mouth when Draco turned to narrow his eyes at her. Harry's words had made her laugh, but there was no second-guessing her choice

or her relationship with Draco. He was going nowhere, and neither was she.

"By the way, Hermione," Neville's voice drew her back into the conversation, "what're you and Malfoy planning to do?"

"Are you going to Australia to find your parents?" Ron asked curiously.

"That's - one of the things," she hedged, falteringly, feeling Draco lace his fingers through hers under the table. His touch was instantly soothing, calming to her skittish nerves. "Mostly, I just want to see them. I want to know if they're well, and I want to try to remember them. And maybe, once I see them, I'll know what to do next."

The others nodded in silent

understanding, before Pansy spoke. "And you, Draco?"

His grip tightened on Hermione's instinctively, and he paused, feeling her fingers curl round his encouragingly. "I might go back to Malfoy Manor," he said at last, his voice quiet. "See if I can salvage anything. Maybe put together two graves for my parents."

"And I'm going with him," Hermione said, noticing the way her friends visibly jolted in surprise. Harry and Ron, in particular, were stunned that she'd want to set foot back in Malfoy Manor, but what they didn't know was that she'd willingly follow Draco to the ends of the earth if she had to. "We're also thinking of fixing the old apartment," she

continued, a fond smile curving her face as she thought of all the months she spent in that safe haven.

"If it's still there," Draco added, "and if it can be fixed."

"You'd better have a room for your old Aunt and Teddy," Andromeda's voice made them whirl around in surprise. Her face was bright, eyes twinkling merrily as she swept past with Molly Weasley. "After imposing on me for so long and staying in my house, I think the favour should be reciprocated."

"Dromeda," Draco grey eyes were serious, without a flicker of his usual sardonic cynicism in them. "You and Teddy can stay with us for as long as you want. Permanently, even."

"We'd love to have you, 'Dromeda," Hermione said, with a smile.

"What about me?" demanded Theo, looking excited about the prospect of returning to the old house. "Am I going to have a room at the apartment too?"

"For Salazar's sake," Draco swore under his breath, as Pansy and Blaise quickly chimed in eagerly with similar demands. Chuckling, Andromeda swept off with the other two ladies, her vivacious laughter echoing down the Hall.

"It would be lovely," Luna agreed merrily, "we could drink hot chocolate at night - "

"Hot chocolate - " Draco's features crumpled in disgust, "what the fuck, Lovegood - "

"And have pancakes for breakfast together in the morning!" Ginny drawled, a wicked gleam in her eyes as she noticed Draco's reaction, "brilliant idea, Luna! I'm in."

"Weaselette, I swear - "

"If my girlfriend's in, I'm bunking with her," Harry said determinedly, a mischievous grin on his face as he watched Draco slowly lose control of the situation. "Ron? Neville? You guys want a room too?"

Neville nodded swiftly, with a wide smile. "Count me in."

"I think I'll bring George and Perce along with me," Ron added smoothly, trying to smother his laughter at Draco's growing irritation. "And maybe even

Bill and Fleur and Charles - "

"No!" Draco growled, his patience finally snapping. "We are not populating the apartment with the entire fucking generation of Weasleys! I'm drawing the line there - apart from you and your Weaselette sister, no other Weasel can step foot in my apartment!"

His explosion was met with stifled laughter from the rest. Hermione stared up at him, a tiny smile on her face. "So are you saying that Ron and Ginny can stay with us if they wanted to?"

"No, Granger, I'm not saying that at all. But I have a feeling that they and the rest of these gits are going to show up at our doorstep regardless of whether we have a room for them or not."

Ron sniggered. "Is this your way of saying yes, Malfoy?"

Draco glared and dragged out a lengthy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose with evident irritation, even though his lips were twitching with vague amusement. "It's going to be a fucking full-house again, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," Neville readily agreed, and the rest quickly chimed in, the conversation convoluting in a medley of laughter and excited exchanges and overall merriment, with Theo's repeated interjections that he called dibs on his old room, and Pansy and Blaise's hurried exclamations that they didn't want their room to be next to Theo's.

Hermione smiled as she gazed around

the table, feeling a warm glow of contentment settling within her. Yes, things were going well. They were all moving on together.

Someday - not today, but someday, they were all going to be okay.

"Thestrals."

Hermione's voice was a quiet whisper in the wind as she tugged at Draco. Bracing his arms over the low wall of the Viaduct, he followed the direction of her finger, where it was pointed to something in the far distance. Amidst the misty winds and lush greenery, he could

make out a flock of black-winged horses galloping across the moors. Their bodies were skeletal, with reptilian features and gaunt limbs, but despite the grotesqueness of their figures, they somehow looked magnificent.

"We can see them now," Hermione continued, her voice so soft he had to strain his ears to hear her. "Because we've seen death."

Draco silently kept his gaze fixed on the Thestrals, clenching his jaw as he thought about all the deaths he'd seen and all the deaths he'd caused. The guilt was never going to go away and he had long since resigned himself to the fact. He was never going to be a good person, no matter what Hermione believed.

But he thought that maybe, just maybe, he could be a better one.

The sound of shoes scraping against gravel broke the silence, and Draco felt two people step up next to them. Harry didn't seem at all surprised to see the Thestrals, and Draco realised that he'd probably seen them before. Ron, on the other hand, looked almost awed to see the creatures, his blue eyes wide as he studied them intently.

"Frightening, isn't it?" Ron remarked at last, shaking his head. "That we can see them? I bet everyone who's been in this war can."

"What's more frightening is that the war's over and I still have to see your ugly faces," Draco muttered, his lips curling

up in a smirk when Hermione elbowed him. But really, it was Potter and the Weasel. Insults were second nature when it came to them.

Ron huffed. "Feeling's mutual, ferret."

"What're the two of you doing here?"

Hermione asked, eyeing her friends curiously, but unlike him, she looked genuinely pleased to see them. "I thought you said you were going to fix the Grand Staircase."

"Yeah, but I needed to give Malfoy this," Harry said, and held out a wand to Draco. The wand was white, with carvings on its side, an intricate, delicate pattern that wound round the length of it. It was the wand that Draco had seen in Voldemort's possession for

three long years, but had never personally wielded it before. "It's yours if you want it."

Draco stared at it for a long moment, before dragging his eyes up to meet Harry's. "Why?"

"I've no use for it. I used it to fix my old wand, and several other people's wands, but there's nothing else I want from it. I figured that since you kept it safe for three years, you can continue to do so."

Slowly, tentatively, Draco took the wand from Harry. It felt heavy in his hands, even though he knew it weighed barely anything at all, but the power it wielded was immense. Taking a deep breath, he tilted his arm, holding the Dark Mark face up, and held the wand to it.

"Erado."

The spell did not take effect. And as he dropped his arm back down to his side, he felt a sinking, frustrated feeling well within him. The past still stuck, Voldemort's influence was still on him in the form of a faded blemish.

"Draco," Hermione's voice was calm as she took his hand. "We all have scars from the war and they're never going away."

She lifted her arm, showing him the words engraved on her skin - it had not disappeared even after Bellatrix's demise. Then Ron was lifting his arm, silently showing Draco the scarred marks on his skin, like sleek, thin ropes had branded themselves onto him and

were never going to go away. Finally, Harry was pushing his hair out of his eyes. The scratch of lightning was still clear as ever, and Draco automatically glared.

"Put that thing away, Potter, I've seen it for seven years during Hogwarts and I don't need to see it again."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Merlin, I was just trying to make you feel better!"

"If you want to make me feel better, give me back my mother's wand."

Harry let out a loud sigh but obliged, reaching into his bag and placing Narcissa Malfoy's wand in Draco's open palm. Draco gripped this one tightly now, swallowing hard and carefully averting his eyes from Harry and Ron's

curious gazes. He pocketed his mother's wand, before returning his attention to the Elder Wand.

He didn't know what to do with it.

"Where's the Stone, by the way?" Ron asked suddenly, as he turned to Hermione.

She shrugged. "I lost it during the battle. A bunch of Centaurs were rushing by to help and I think they must've stomped it to the ground, because I couldn't find it after that."

"Pity."

"Not really. The Stone's frightfully powerful, but resurrecting the dead might bring about repercussions. There're many people I'd like to bring back from the dead - like Snape, or

Tonks, or Fred, or even Lucius and Narcissa," she smiled when Draco met her gaze. "But perhaps it's time to move on and let the past stay in the past."

The other three fell silent as she let her words sink in. And as Draco looked at the Elder Wand in his hands, he suddenly realised that he didn't want it. Didn't need it. There were things that mattered and he had them all - a future, his friends, a family, Hermione.

Then there were things that didn't matter, and the Elder Wand was one of them.

He held the wand up. It caught a glint of sunlight, illuminating the Thestral-hair core and the power surging within. Then, right at the point where the light refracted off it, he snapped the wand

cleanly into two. He heard Hermione's surprised gasp and Ron's cry of reluctance, but his head was pounding with a newfound clarity as he stepped up onto the ledge and hurled the pieces off the Viaduct. The pieces disappeared into the vast landscape below, too fragmented, too nondescript for anyone who found it to realise that what they held was once a piece of the most powerful object on this earth.

Ron's eyes were wide and tinged with a slight dismay. "Malfoy, did you just - "

"I don't need it," Draco said simply, feeling Hermione lace her fingers through his, squeezing his hand tight. "I have my own wand."

Ron still looked rather wistful as he

gazed out over the Viaduct, but Harry shot Draco a fleeting glance of understanding. Then Draco met Hermione's gaze, and her smile was brighter than the sun, the happiness that emanated from her utterly infectious, like a warm glow that surrounded everyone who was within reach.

She pushed herself up on the tips of her toes to press a brief kiss to his lips, before reaching into her satchel. "Harry," she said, as she drew out a piece of fabric and held it out to him. "I believe this is yours."

Harry hesitantly took the Cloak of Invisibility, the final and only Deathly Hallow that was still in existence. "Don't you want it?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's yours. And I don't need to hide under it anymore."

"No more hiding," Draco agreed quietly, watching the sunlight peek between the trees and the Thestrals grazing in the shadows. "We're safe now."

Finally.

They were back where they first began. Only now, it was an empty place filled with rust and dust, broken wood and glass, arbitrary pieces of furniture and squalid walls. Hermione looked away and turned to Draco, noticing how he

was watching the destroyed apartment with a faint flicker of nostalgia and an equally faint flicker of hope in his eyes. She set her bag down, along with the red telephone that Draco had nicked for her from this apartment months ago, before he destroyed everything in its wake. When she looked up, his eyes were lit with vague curiosity, frowning slightly as he studied the telephone.

"You think we can get one of those TV things?" He asked unexpectedly.

Her eyebrows shot up. "You do know that's a muggle contraption, right?"

"It's a box that plays like a million moving photographs, but with sound and everything. We're getting one of those."

She smiled as she watched him fondly,

and when his gaze met hers, his eyes reluctantly crinkled at the corners in a faint smile as he reached down to press his lips quickly against hers, stealing her breath, before drawing away. She watched him step into the empty house, taking in the state of destruction around him. Like so many other things, destroying was so easy.

Putting it back together, piece by piece, brick by brick - that was the difficult part.

Distantly, Hermione thought about how far she'd come since her capture. The past three years now seemed so far away, but the present was so surreal that sometimes, she still couldn't quite make sense of it. Sometimes, she was still

afraid. Of the present, of the future, and of the other curveballs life could throw her way. There were still nightmares, there were still shadows, there was still dark matter.

"Hermione," his voice broke her trend of thought. She looked up when he stepped close, intertwining his fingers with hers. "Remember that spell I taught you?"

She looked at their intertwined hands and smiled. Because at that moment, she realised that it didn't matter. She had him, with her, and everything else just fell into place. "Yes," she said, reaching for her wand in her pocket. "I remember."

He did a quick demonstration to remind her of the wand action, before pointing

to the rubble in the corner. "Ready?"
Hermione nodded and took a deep
breath, holding up her wand just as
Draco held up his.
"Reparo."

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afterword

F A Q

P E R S O N A L

Favourite chapter?

C25. There's something very heart-warming but also bittersweet about that chapter; and Draco kissing Hermione in the middle of an empty, destroyed room

has got to be one of my favourite scenes I've ever written.

Favourite house?

Slytherin [on Pottermore and at heart]. I've done multiple quizzes before and Slytherin's mostly the house I get sorted into, sometimes Ravenclaw.

Favourite spell?

Accio. I'd accio Tom Felton over to my house anyday.

Favourite thing about Draconian?

17-65, period. I really enjoyed writing

about the camaraderie between the group as well as the blurring of lines between the houses because of a common cause. My only wish was that Rowling had created an important enough character belonging to Hufflepuff within Harry's circle of friends so that there'd be all four houses included.

STORY-RELATED

Does Hermione ever get her memories

back?

It's possible. As the effects of the Cruciatus wear off with time, she might just regain her memories eventually, though it is unlikely that it would change the dynamics of her relationship with anyone, much less Draco.

Why doesn't the Golden Trio ever use the Killing curse?

Simple - because it's canon. Nowhere in the series does it state that Harry, Hermione or Ron used the Avada to off someone. And while this is dystopian AU, I'd like to retain some of that innocence and goodness in them.

Was Theo x Luna intended?

No, not until Theo made that Slytherin hat for Luna. Every moment preceding that was completely unintentional and plenty other moments following that were also unintentional. The only parts where I did some minor switching of names / vague teasing was -

[C37] when Luna healed Theo's wounds (it was originally supposed to be Hermione healing Theo)

[C41] when Theo helped Luna (it was originally supposed to be Blaise helping Luna)

[C49] when Luna was crucio'd by Bellatrix and Theo ran over to her

[C50] every moment; if only to make way for Dark Matter.

The wide variety of ship names for Theo x Luna has always amused me, but I've always referred to them as #Leo, for simple reason - Luna is the moon, Theo (Nott) is the night; and together, #Leo is constellation.

CHAPTER - SPECIFIC

32 | Why was Hermione re-sorted into Ravenclaw?

This is actually based on canon. In the HP series, Hermione actually had a

near-hatstall where the Sorting Hat couldn't quite decide whether she belonged to Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. Well, as we all know, the Hat does take the student's personal preference into consideration - I would think that pre-Draconian, Hermione wanted nothing but to be brave; in Draconian, however, Hermione relies more on her wits to pull through, hence Ravenclaw. The same goes for Theo, bravery has become his forte for the most part, hence Gryffindor.

48-49 | Who was supposed to die?

Two people.

1) Blaise

From the very beginning, Blaise was

supposed to die - he had the noblest intentions with the least sense of self-preservation. There're several parts of Draconian that foreshadow this - one very distinct one is where Blaise makes Pansy promise to keep fighting even if he doesn't make it to see the end [C14], and I think Blaise's death would've really been a tragedy for the three other Slytherins and Hermione if it had actually happened (not to mention that Pansy would be alone, which will leave space for potential Ron+Pansy moments because I semi-ship).

2) Andromeda

Andromeda was supposed to die in the final battle. That bit where Hermione protects Draco from Voldemort's spell

[C49] was supposed to be something Andromeda did, only it'd end in her death. A part of me thought it'd be fitting that Andromeda would die in the war the way the rest of her family had, and it'd be lovely to see Draco and Hermione having to take care of Teddy.

Unfortunately, writing Draconian was actually a lot of fun and I loved the characters dearly, which made it absolutely impossible to kill any important character off. In retrospect, this doesn't make for very realistic writing but - well, aren't you glad that none of them died?

Bellatrix?

This is somewhat based on the movie. I've always found Bellatrix's death to be one of the most intriguing - you actually don't know what Dark curse Molly hit her with, but the end result practically disintegrates her to pieces, much like an actual Reducto. So I followed canon for the Molly VS Bellatrix battle, until the very end, where Hermione was the one to splinter Bellatrix into fragments.

Why Hermione? Well, back when Draco told Theo to "get in line" if he wanted to kill Bellatrix [C29], their motives in wanting to off her were skewed with pure vengeance blinding them. And I realised that there were actually only two people who truly deserved to kill

Bellatrix - not because of revenge, but because there would be an incredible amount of poetic justice if they did:

1) Andromeda, because her daughter Nymphadora died by Bellatrix's hand and 2) Hermione, because of the torturing she had to endure at the Malfoy Manor.

However, Andromeda didn't take part in the final battle, and so it had to be Hermione. And I found it very fitting that, among the lot, Hermione was the only one who had no wish to actually kill anybody, not even Bellatrix, but did it so that no one else would have to add more red to their ledger.

49 | Why was the battle between Harry and Voldemort so anti-climatic?

It may seem anti-climatic action-wise. But Harry defeated Voldemort the same way in the books. It's so canon that I chose to end it the same way.

But this final battle scene in Draconian has a lot of significance. Amidst all the twists and turns, all the years spent building up to this pivotal moment, all the people who sacrificed their lives during the war; it only required a few seconds of courage, Narcissa Malfoy's wand and one Expelliarmus to defeat Voldemort.

And it mirrors reality perfectly, I think. In every war, in every confrontation, the evil always seems like such a daunting,

menacing threat. But take away all the forces supporting that threat and there's just that one person you have to fight.

50 | What's up the epilogue?

The epilogue actually sticks as close to canon as possible.

In the series, Harry, Ron and Neville join the Auror programme; although Ron later leaves to continue Weasley's Wizard Wheezes with George, and Neville becomes a Herbology professor at Hogwarts. Ginny goes into quidditch, while Luna becomes a naturalist.

In Draconian, those five make plans according to canon, while I rearranged the Slytherins + Hermione's futures accordingly to the spin-off. For instance,

Theo becomes an Auror so that the aftermath of the war, especially the struggles of the Ministry as well as the fate of the Death-Eaters, can be further explored in Dark Matter.

But more information about that can be found below.



SEQUEL/SPINOFFS

Sequel

There will be no sequels to Draconian. Draco and Hermione's story are complete and I think that the epilogue was a good enough place to end at.

Spin-Off

D A R K M A T T E R

Dark Matter is the official spin-off to Draconian. It takes place 6 months after the events of Draconian; and features Theo x Luna as protagonists; with Theo especially being far closer to hp-canon than he was in this book.

To read Dark Matter, simply visit my profile and click on the link.

Any other questions? Please post them here!