

Don't Fear the Reaper

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Don't Fear the Reaper

by [LongtimeLurker1111](#)

Summary

Hermione doesn't remember the accident. All she knows is that she woke up in Malfoy Manor soul bound and married to Draco Malfoy.

Notes

"All our times have come
Here but now they're gone
Seasons don't fear the reaper
Nor do the wind, the sun or the rain
So come on, baby (don't fear the reaper)
Take my hand (don't fear the reaper)
We'll be able to fly (don't fear the reaper)
'Cause baby, I'm your man"
-Don't Fear the Reaper, Gus Black

Hi everyone! I'm back! Buckle up, friends this one is going to be a bumpy ride. I intend to make this piece darker so be warned. This work is not a playbook for healthy relationships! It is a journey into fantasy. One where you can fall in love with a DARK Draco and safely put the book down when you are ready to come back to reality. Mind the damn tags and read at your own risk!

Chapter 1: Missing Pages

Draco places a tender kiss on the top of my head and orders, "Time for bed, love."

His hands are heavy on my shoulders. He's leaning over me from behind as I sit, curled up on an overstuffed armchair by the hearth in our library. I close my eyes and savor the smells of crisp air and his signature cologne — subtle but delicious.

I don't want to go upstairs yet. I'm engrossed in the chapter I'm reading in *Creative Uses for Commonplace Spells* by Ziggy Wattleburn.

I tilt my head back to take in his appearance and notice a hair that fell to his forehead. He always looks so put together, even when casual.

"Who was at the gate? You were outside a while," I say to change the subject.

Draco stands and tucks his hands in his pockets, studying me. His muscular frame sends shivers across my lower abdomen, and I watch as he raises a knowing eyebrow — the arrogant bastard. I love it.

"No one of importance," he says with a shrug as the fire crackles next to us.

He holds his hand out for my book in a silent directive, but I place a finger in the crease of the parchment then pull away.

"You go," I try. "I want to read a bit longer."

"Hermione —"

It's a warning.

He's naturally protective, but the past year put him further on edge — or so he tells me.

Taking a deep breath and tightening his lips in a scowl, he offers with a pointed glare, "You know the Mind Healer doesn't want you to push yourself. I'd prefer if you let an elf read to you." He's told me this several times before. "You're still recovering from the accident."

I watch as his brows furrow and his eyes tighten. His face may as well be carved from stone. He's Posiden — gorgeous but powerful. I find myself praying for safe travels across this treacherous debate.

The accident

I don't know what the batty-old Healer is on about. Reading barely causes headaches. However, trying to force myself to remember the before-times feels like my mind is stretching to its breaking point. It's as if I'm a dried-out rubber band, and I'm always fearful of stretching myself too far. I don't want to break.

All I know is that there was a war, I'm married and soul-bound to a man that I cherish, and that I used to be a *warrior*. From what Draco tells me, I was a fierce General and instrumental in ending the fight.

Draco and I love each other. My name is Hermione Malfoy. I'm 25 years old. There was a war, but it's over. I'm safe in our Manor.

I repeat to myself for comfort. I don't remember the accident.

I do, however, remember waking up in our bed a year ago, feeling scared and confused.

That day, Draco moved quickly from his chair in the corner of the room and wrapped me in his arms. "You're okay," he told me as tears stung my eyes. His large hands cupped my cheeks and wiped the salty drops away as he repeated, "Shh, you're okay. I'm here."

"W-where am I?" I asked, my voice shaking as I pulled my legs to my chest.

"This is our home," he offered in a low, soothing tone. "You were hit by a strong memory spell at the final battle of a terrible war." His hands moved to my arms and ran across my skin, causing me to melt into his comfort.

I remember feeling the roiling emotions in my head. I was confused and disoriented, but even back then, I knew, without a doubt, that Draco represented safety.

I dried my eyes on the back of my hand and steeled myself to ask, "Who are you?"

Draco's expression is still etched into my memory. I'll never forget the resolute devastation that he tried to hide behind his silver eyes.

Clearing his throat, he said, "My name is Draco." His voice was kind despite his obvious heartache.

Then I felt a lump in my throat as I stared at the sheets and whispered, "— and, who — am I?"

"You're name is Hermione, " he said, brushing off his sadness and shifting back into protector mode. "You're a warrior — a genius. The most brilliant witch I know and I'm so glad you're awake because —" he wrapped his strong fingers around my shaking hands and rubbed his thumb back and forth over my knuckles. "— you're also the love of my life."

Shaken from my memories of that first day, I look back up into Draco's eyes as he towers above me.

"I'll call for Millie," I offer as a compromise. "I don't like to burden the elves, but she might like a break from her other tasks."

Draco shifts his weight and runs his hand through his hair, looking relieved. "Alright," he sighs. "I've got a few more items I can look over." He bends to kiss me again. "Take your time."

As he walks to the library door, Draco calls for Millie and directs her to read to me. He doesn't wait for me to do that myself.

I roll my eyes and chuckle as the friendly elf bobs over to where I sit.

"What is you wanting to read, my lady?" she asks.

I smile, taking in her small appearance. She's wearing a simple green smock and a gray cardigan.

When I first woke up here, the elves bothered me. It wasn't anything about their demeanor — they're all lovely. Instead, it was this feeling deep in my stomach that it wasn't right to have them about, doing our cooking and cleaning.

Draco assured me, though, that they're happy to work here and that he pays them well. He said I taught him the importance of paying elves for their work — more information about my mysterious former self.

I pull back my feet and transfigure my chair into a loveseat, indicating that Millie can sit with me. Though, she drops her ears and shakes her head. So, I summon a short stool with an embroidery cushioned top instead, which makes her smile.

Once she's perched on the stool with her little legs hanging over the edge, I say, "Here." I hand her the book, and she beams while flipping to my earmarked page and starting to read.

It's surprising to me that some things take no effort whatsoever to remember from before — like magic, and other parts of my abilities are so intricately locked in my mind.

After a year, I'm coming to terms with who I am instead of who I used to be, but it was a different story when I first woke up.

Draco brought a massive stack of books to the bedroom the first week. He knew I'd want to research my symptoms and said he got everything he could find in the library regarding the topic. He insisted, though, that he read to me.

That's how we spent the first few months getting to know one another again.

I'd pick a book from the stack that I wanted to research, and he'd lean against the headboard as I recovered. At first, I left lots of space between us in the bed. There were several days where I laid on my side and listened while staring at the man who was supposed to be my husband and grieving the fact that, in many ways, he was a stranger to me.

Eventually, though, I found myself longing for his calm strength and reassuring touch. I spent days as a ball of anxiety, wanting to know what it felt like to be touched by him. I was embarrassed that he certainly held intimate memories of me and my body.

Draco always took my lead. He never initiated anything after the first day I woke up and instead waited for me to decide I was comfortable.

After about a month, I reached out to him on the bed, no longer able to hold myself back. I needed to feel him again to ground myself in reality. So, I brushed my fingers along his forearm as he read.

His eyes widened, and his steady reading stopped.

Then a penetrating sigh of relief shifted his shoulders. After that, he'd pull me into his arms each day, and it always felt right with my core.

I don't know how to describe it other than being with Draco has been the one solid foundation on my road to recovery.

We ran out of books after two months and accepted that all we could do was wait and hope for my memories to return as the Healer suggested.

As each day passed, I started to feel stronger. Then one night, as I sat by Draco's side in the library, he held my hand and said, "It's been lovely spending so much time together."

He ran his hand up my arm then tucked my hair behind my ear, causing me to warm to his touch. "Your strength is back and you're comfortable here —," he tilted my chin up to meet his eyes. "Right?" He spoke with complete confidence.

I placed my own hand at the base of his strong neck, then nodded.

"I need to go back to work tomorrow," he finished.

That's when our days curled up together came to an end. I still think back to those first weeks with a mixture of grief and nostalgia. It was a confusing time — a sad time, but reconnecting with Draco felt like finding my true north.

After he went back to work, I'd spend my days walking through the Manor, cataloging its many rooms or popping in on the elves to see if they'd let me help cook.

At first, they flat out refused me, but I insisted that keeping myself busy was easier on my recovery. Millie was the first one to agree. She asked me to help place the dinner rolls in a basket which I scuffed at because it clearly took no cooking skill at all.

Millie, the sweetheart that she is, placed her wrinkled hand on my arm and told me that I *had* no cooking skill with all the compassion that she could muster. I balked and tried my hand the next day at helping to bake the bread but found out quickly that she was right. I was awful.

That's when I asked her to teach me to cook instead, and now I can proudly admit that I am getting the hang of it.

A couple of months ago, I even decided to make an entire dinner of bangers and mash by myself. Draco ate it and told me it was wonderful. Unfortunately, though, I have to admit it wasn't that great.

When I'm not learning to cook or walking the halls of the Manor, I sneak away to read. It's my favorite way to spend an afternoon. I can simply get lost in a book.

I haven't been outside the Manor walls yet.

Draco encourages me to walk the gardens, but he tells me that I shouldn't worry if I can't handle the outside world yet. The war left many things in shambles, and he understands if the idea scares me. The truth is, I'm deadly curious, but he seems confident it would set my recovery back, so I've stayed in our home for a year.

Millie yawns, and I know she must be tired. She's worked hard all day.

"Millie," I whisper. "Go to bed. It's late. I'll be fine without you."

She glances at the door, clutching the book to her chest and rubbing her hands back and forth over her arms. Her ears droop again.

"Master wishes me read to you," she says.

I stand to stretch and pretend to yawn. "Master wants many things," I counter. I don't need her to stay with me. "I think I'm done reading anyway."

"Are you sure?" She asks, looking relieved that I don't plan to pick the book back up myself.

"Of course! I'll just doze by the fire until Draco comes back. It's cozy here."

Millie stares at me for longer than necessary and then finally nods. "Okay," she says and hops off the stool. Though, before she goes, she stops herself and walks back to tuck the book under her arm.

It's cute how she thinks I'm only interested in that book.

I summon a blanket to pull over my legs as she walks away, and once she's passed the door, I chuckle to myself at the extent Draco and Millie go to in the name of my recovery.

While I wait a moment to make sure the coast is clear, I close my eyes and enjoy the comfort of our home. The fire is warm, the windows are open, letting in the cool spring air, and when I breathe deeply, I catch a whiff of the approaching thunderstorm.

After a minute, I stand up to peruse the texts in our massive library, running my fingers over their dusty spines. There are so many here I could entertain myself for years and never run out. In fact, there's an entire section on wizarding professions alone that I find fascinating.

Draco works for the Ministry in *war recovery*. I'm not exactly sure what he does except follow the directions of the new Minister for Magic. I asked him about it once after he started going back to the office.

I remember leaning against the doorframe one afternoon admiring his form. I missed him during the day. The Manor is always colder when he's away.

"What is it you do all day?" I asked as I watched him take off his robe.

The question caused him to pause, and I thought for a moment that I saw his jaw tighten. I must have imagined it, though, because a moment later, he was scouring my expression for something, causing me to blush. He'd stopped in the middle of rolling up his sleeves, and I could see the muscles flexing over his shoulders and forearms.

I shook my head, realizing the scrutiny went both ways. I was having a hard time controlling my attraction to him.

"Community revitalization and infrastructure design," he said with precision. I felt his eyes on me and knew he could sense my discomfort.

I shifted my weight, feeling a tingling in my stomach, and walked towards him.

"Is that how you made all your money?" I asked to continue building up my nerves. I just needed to keep talking to drum up my courage.

"No," he stated but didn't elaborate. I could sense the tension coiling between us.

I placed my hand on his arm over his strange tattoo when I reached him. His gaze broke from my eyes as he stared at my touch. Then, after a beat, he lifted my hand from his arm and placed it on his chest. Our fingers entwined over his hard torso as I lifted to place a tentative kiss on his lips.

"Fuuuck," he growled, and the sound shot right to my toes.

Testing the water, Draco placed his hand at the back of my neck. He watched my expression closely, and I nodded my consent as he put his lips to mine again, this time with a fire I hadn't seen in him to date.

I make my way through the tall shelves looking for another book that might sate my curiosity because I'm trying to solve a riddle. Last night I woke up around three in the morning to use the loo, and while I was in the fuzzy middle ground between sleep and awake, I heard a phrase.

It's LeviOsa, not LevioSA.

Draco was sound asleep next to me, lying on his stomach with his arms under the pillow. His bare back gleamed in the moonlight streaming in from the tall windows. He scrunched his eyes every now and then, causing the tiny scar over his brow to crease. I think that the phrase that slipped into my dream state was the edge of a memory. It felt different than a dream — more solid somehow. That's why I was reading Wattleburn's book. I can't imagine what significance such a simple spell held for me.

I don't want to tell Draco yet for fear of getting his hopes up. Also, sometimes when I talk about memories, he seems to bristle. Then, he'll change the subject or scowl, and his voice will deepen. I think he's worried about me. Apparently, I was in a magical coma for over a month last year. He says it was excruciating to sit by and wonder each day if I'd ever wake up.

The memory could be significant for any number of reasons. I'd hoped that reading more about the various uses of the spell might jog my recollection.

I scan the titles of other simple spellbooks, but nothing seems to catch my interest. I'm upset that I couldn't recall more of the memory tonight. I sigh and wind my way through the stacks, headed back towards the door to the Manor atrium. I feel melancholy. I love Draco, and I love our life together, but he seems happy to wait forever for my memories to return, and I'm sick of living a half-life. I'm desperate to know more about who I was before.

I see another book sitting on a side table by my favorite chair, and my lips turn upward. The leather cover is care-worn, and the pages are thin from use. *Hogwarts: A History* by Bathilda Bagshot. Draco mentioned early on that it used to be my favorite book. I'm not sure if it's from knowing that tidbit or not, but the new me also cherishes this work.

I often still ask Draco to read some of it to me in the evenings, and carrying it around makes me feel connected to the old Hermione.

Sometimes just sitting and running my fingers over the pages helps me feel better. I imagine my former self pouring through these same pages, which lifts my spirits.

Hoping it will do the same trick now, I pick the book up from the table and stand in the glow of the fire while thumbing through the pages. I feel the gentle breeze against my hand. Closing my eyes, I take in the smell of parchment and leather tannins. I sigh, feeling a bit better, and open my eyes again. Though, before setting the book back on the table, I notice something shocking.

The inside title page is missing.

I hold the book closer to my face to examine the tragedy in the low light of the fire. Who would do that to my beloved text!? I run my finger over the rough edge of a ripped-out page in the crease of the binding and fume. I know it seems irrational, but it feels like a piece of *me* was torn away.

I take a shallow breath feeling my ears warm in anger, then notice something else mysterious, though subtle. There is an indentation along the center of the page as if someone wrote on the ripped-out page. The book traitor must have written plenty hard enough because I can almost make out the three words that the assailant wrote before stealing the page from the book.

Draco's heavy footfall echoes on the marble tile outside the library's door. He's coming to meet me, but I have to figure out who would dare to defile *my* book and what message was so important that they needed to destroy the entire page to erase its memory.

I summon some cool ash from the stone near the fireplace and rub it onto the page to reveal the words. Then, my heart slams into my stomach, and the hairs on the back of my neck raise on end. My arms shake, and my vision blurs as Draco says from the door, "Hermione —?"

Etched out across the page are three words, written in my own familiar script.

Don't trust Draco!

Chapter 2: Bonds & Confusion

Chapter Summary

"So look me in the eyes
Tell me what you see
Perfect paradise
Tearing at the seams
I wish I could escape
I don't wanna fake it
Wish I could erase it
Make your heart believe
But I'm a bad liar, bad liar
Now you know
Now you know"
-Bad Liar, Imagine Dragons

Chapter Notes

Nearly 1000 views and over 100 Kudos on the first chapter!? Ya'll I'm touched! Here's to a fun, sexy, dark read that starts out with a lot of confusion and light on plot but will get deeper as we move forward. I promise.

Smut in the second chapter. This is definitely NOT a slow burn.

Read the tags.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Draco and I walk upstairs together as my head spins. I don't understand how this is possible or when I would've written *that*? My heart is pounding, and I feel light-headed.

Our heels hitting against the polished, stone steps rattle in my ears as I walk to our room on autopilot. Draco's hand is on my lower back. Millie headed directly for his office when she finished reading to me, and therefore he came and sought me out. I cringe, wondering if I can even trust my elf friend any longer.

Wringing my hands together in front of me, I wonder how the hell everything went so sideways. Twenty minutes ago, all was well. Yes, I worried about my recovery and who I used to be, but I never once worried about Draco.

Three simple words appeared, and now I feel entirely upended. I can't make sense of the situation. Draco has never given me cause for concern. I try not to spiral too far out of control before I can gather more information, but right now, I'm ready to turn and bolt down the steps behind us.

We reach the top of the stairs as my mind continues to churn. My skin feels itchy all over, like every fiber of my being is set to high alert.

Draco reaches his arm over my shoulder and pushes our bedroom door open.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Draco asks, threading his hand under my hair and behind my neck. He turns me to face him, and I catch his expression — calm and calculating.

"Sorry?" I ask to give myself time to think.

"Your anxiety is through the roof. What's the matter?"

Damnit!

It's tough to keep my feelings to myself, seeing as though Draco and I are bonded. It's never been a problem before — that I know of! But now I'm questioning everything!

Shaking the nerves from my shoulders, I slow my thoughts. I need to stop and think logically. I *know* Draco — every inch of him. He's a good, kind man. Yes, he's arrogant at times and bossy, maybe, but it's impossible for him to be untrustworthy or for me to have written those words. If that were true, then Draco would've needed to erase my memories and construct a new life for me. That kind of magic is incredibly difficult. It's nearly unheard of, especially for someone our age.

Draco rubs my neck and shoulders and takes in my expression. He's staring down at me as if he reads my every thought, but I find my anxiety melting away with his touch.

His fingers knead my tight shoulders, causing me to relax — another perk of our bond. Simply being close to him causes my emotions to soothe and my attention to focus solely on his hypnotic pull.

I take a deep breath. The room is warm, and the sconces are low. It's comfortable here. I breathe out through my nose and notice the flowers Draco picked for me from the gardens. They're placed in a glass vase on the dresser and smell of aconite and irises.

I'm not sure what I saw. It could've been anyone's handwriting. I have no memory of writing those words, taking any potions, or having spells cast upon me. I remember every detail of yesterday. I woke up to Draco's rigid torso against my back and his steady fingers on my sex. We ate breakfast together of eggs benedict and grapefruit slices. I worked with the elves in the kitchen all morning and read in the afternoon. Draco came home late, after I had already gone to bed, but he woke me with a kiss as he lifted my nightgown and slid into me.

He leans over and pulls me towards him by my neck. The move is possessive but gentle. He kisses my temple and more of my nervous energy eeks from my system. I haven't answered him yet, and he continues to watch me closely.

"Go take a shower, and I'll call for your tea. We'll talk when you're out," Draco says with an upwards nod toward the ensuite and in a deep, confident tone that typically causes my toes to curl.

I usually can't get enough of the way he orders me around. It's as if he's hardwired to care for me, and I'm eager to accept. Draco's simple control feels like safety and comfort with my life so unstable. Now, I don't know. I feel the usual arousal from his words but then begin to worry again.

A shower sounds good. It'll give me more time to think, and the hot water might help me relax further. So I do as I'm told and stay under the spray for a while. I let the warm water

slide down my shoulders and over my breasts. I smell the soap, and it surrounds me with the only comfort I've known for the past year — Draco. He's everywhere.

When I walk back into the bedroom, I'm wrapped in my soft cotton robe with the belt tied tight. I feel better. I must have made a mistake. I skimmed the words too fast, plus I may have missed half the original message. Maybe the complete statement said something like, *Don't trust Draco to find the cure to my recovery. Find it yourself!* Though, that doesn't explain why I can't remember writing the note. Or maybe in my quick look, I was wrong about whose handwriting I saw. Maybe Draco wrote it, trying to give himself a stern pep talk. *Don't trust, Draco!*

I'm determined to find out more about the cryptic message as soon as possible.

Draco lounges in our chair by the window, reading through a report. The glass panes are open, letting in the damp air from the thunderstorm that now rumbles outside. I watch the rain pelt the glass and notice steam rising from a cup of chamomile and lavender tea resting on the wide sill. Draco brings me tea every night to calm my nerves.

His eyes meet mine as I start towards the bed, and he orders, "Come here."

Evenings often start for us in that chair. I typically curl into Draco as he reads, or we spend time discussing my day — never his.

He widens his legs, making room for me in his lap, and I take a deep breath, moving towards him. I don't know how to start my questioning. *Hey honey, can I trust you?* or *So, funny-thing, you've not been lying to me for a year, right?*

Settling into the cage of his arms, I steel myself for what's to come. Draco looks down at me, then shifts his weight and leans over to hand me my tea. The warm mug feels good against my hands, causing me to release a bit more of the tension from between my shoulder blades.

"Alright, enough," he says while placing one hand on my bare upper thigh and using the other to skim along the collar of my thin robe. "What's going on?"

"I—" my voice is trembling, and I watch as the water in my cup moves in tiny expanding circles. "I feel stuck." I lie. "I need to know more about who I was and what happened before the accident."

"Sure, love. Ask me anything," he says, but I feel his shoulders tense.

"When did we meet? What was our wedding like? How did we survive the war?" I ask as it all tumbles out of me — questions I haven't asked in a while. My head starts to throb, but I ignore the pain. Draco evades my probing or claims that he's worried the conversation will cause a setback whenever we've talked about the past before.

"Woah, slow down. First off, tell me why you're so troubled all the sudden?"

He's doing it again, and it makes my hands shake harder. I want him to be trustworthy. I feel my love for him deep within my core. That can't be manufactured.

I knew from the moment I awoke that I loved Draco. It took me a few months to admit that fact, but his patience won out. After the evening that I initiated our kiss, Draco began to share his true feelings for me.

"Hermione, I know this is hard for you," he'd say while holding me before we fell asleep. "— but you're so strong. We'll get through this. Nothing can harm us when we're together. You taught me that."

Finally, around my fourth month in the Manor, I rolled atop of Draco one night and slid my nightgown over my head. Draco's eyes darkened with lust at the sight of my naked body. He watched with a hungry devotion as I freed his length and sank down on him. I felt such a mixture of power and control that night but secretly couldn't tell if it was my power or Draco's that was so alluring.

That evening was perfect. Tonight, I intend to find my way back to our equilibrium or discover real answers.

"I remembered something last night," I blurt out. It's as good as any excuse for my heightened emotions. "It was just a phrase or a whisp of something, and I was trying to research its meaning tonight in the library, but — I didn't find anything useful."

Something passes over Draco's expression. I see the slightest narrowing of his eyes.

"That's great, Hermione," he says, but his smile looks forced. "Tell me about it. What did you remember?"

"A spell. Wingardium Leviosa — but it was something about the pronunciation," I offer. Then, feeling hopeful, I turn my eyes to his and ask, "Does it mean anything to you?"

Draco thinks for a moment before he says, "No. Sorry."

Tears sting my eyes, and I brush them away with the back of my hand. I knew it was a long shot.

"So," he says, raising his eyebrows and waiting for me to sip my tea. He takes the cup from me again when I'm done and then pulls my head to his chest. "You and I met at Hogwarts, as you know."

"— yes, but when did we really get together. All you've ever told me is that we didn't get on at first." I interrupt, and Draco huffs a laugh, pulling me back to his chest.

"Quiet, witch. I'm trying to tell you."

I hold my breath waiting for him to continue. Finally, it seems like he's going to give me some real answers.

"Maybe you're right. I've been so worried about setting back your recovery that I've kept you in the dark in many ways. But, you're too smart to remain unaware." He shifts and lifts my chin with a finger, then kisses me. I taste the Fire Whiskey still on his lips from when he worked in his office earlier.

"You're right. We didn't get on at school. I was an asshole to you and you were an unbearable swot."

I raise my head in indignation, but he continues, and I can hear his smile as he talks.

"— used to be like a Niffler when any professor asked a question. You had to get the right answer." His thumb rubs the soft skin of my bare thigh, and it makes me squirm. "You were so desperate for praise." He kisses behind my ear and whispers, "That never changed." His voice is sinful. "You're still a very good girl. Aren't you, love?"

It's hard to think with Draco's lips on my skin and his hands making their way towards my sex. My body calls to him. It's like this every night. Or at least it has been since we first made love. Every morning starts with the steady drumbeat of our magical cores calling to one another, and each evening ends with the same rhythm.

I try to imagine my younger self begging for answers during class, and the mental picture is hazy. Wait, maybe — I see a caldron and a tall professor with — with long, greasy hair —

Suddenly I clutch my forehead as a shock of pain shoots through my skull. I clench my teeth and draw a quick breath. Shit!

Draco's hands grasp my face as he stares into my eyes. "We're done!" He growls. "I knew it. You can't handle it."

"No, Draco!" I plead, "I can! Just give me a minute. Please, I need answers. I'm — scared."

He stands and cradles me in his arms, marching towards the bed. Once I'm settled under the covers, he walks away to undress.

"Scared of what?" He asks, and his tone chills my insides. "You're safe here. The war is over. We're happy. What could possibly frighten you?"

Maybe the possibility that I'll never remember who I really am or the chance that — that—. I don't even want to think about the chance that Draco may not have told me the truth about this world that I've enjoyed for a year.

I sit against the headboard clutching the covers to my chest and staring out the window at the rain while Draco moves around in the walk-in closet.

"I'm scared of everything I don't know." I admit.

Draco walks back into the bedroom shirtless and wearing dark gray sweat pants. He stretches his arms over his head and casually displays his strong muscles. He's a contradiction — a perfect physical representation of strength yet always tender with me.

Draco has never been anything but kind since I woke up here, I remind myself.

"Hermione —" he starts as he reaches the bed again and stands above me. His hands are tucked in his pockets, and I feel the bond, pulling us closer to one another.

"I had a horrible thought tonight." I blurt out, interrupting him again. I pull together my courage and demand, "Reassure me, Draco. Tell me that there's no chance. It's silly I know, but —"

He tilts my head to reach his gaze, and in my frantic effort to hear his reassurance, I say, "Show me something. Some kind of proof so that I know this isn't all a lie."

His eyes darken.

"A picture — or anything," I continue. "Just so that I know for sure that you didn't —"

"*Didn't what?*" His tone is ice.

Suddenly, my courage is gone. Draco takes a breath and closes his eyes for a moment, rubbing his forehead. I wait for his response and swear I hear him whisper something that sounds like, "*You want to know more?*"

When he opens his eyes again, his expression sends a chill up my spine. He looks like a predator, ready to devour me whole. I've never seen this darker side of him, and though it probably shouldn't, it causes me to squeeze my thighs together under the sheets.

"You're scared of me?" he asks, looking dangerous but playful.

"um — no. I —" I stutter as Draco leans over me and starts to slide his knees between my legs. He crawls over my body on the bed. I lean back with his approach, and he rests his large arms by my ears.

"I've been very gentle with you this past year." He places his hand over my throat but doesn't add any pressure. "Did you know that you used to like it *rough*?"

"What?" I stammer as my sex starts to drip with anticipation. I can't tell if my body is betraying me or not.

"You wanted to know more, right sweetheart?" Draco shifts to his elbows, and I feel his weight press me into the mattress — his length against my upper thigh. He uses one hand to pull aside the fabric of my robe, exposing my left breast.

"Haven't I taken care of you this past year?" He asks while licking my straining nipple and pulling it into his mouth.

The feeling is delicious. Gods, this man knows how to make me melt. My fear mixes with my arousal, and it's a potent combination.

Draco slides his hand up my leg towards my core. He dips his thick finger between my wet lips and brushes my clit.

"Haven't I been good to you?"

Fuuuuuuck.

He circles my throbbing nub, and spikes of pleasure run over my skin.

"I can't hear you, Hermione," he croons.

"Yes," I breathe. I'm so focused on Draco's fingers and how they're causing a steady pooling of desire in my lower abdomen. This aggressive side of Draco feels like coming home — like it's always been there, waiting below the surface to break free, and my body responds immediately.

Draco moves his hand and frees himself from his drawstring. I open my legs to welcome him.

As he pushes into me, my tight walls stretch to accommodate his size. It's perfect. We're made for one another.

He sucks on my neck and asks into my skin, "So then, what does it matter if I lied?"

What!? A voice in the back of my mind yells. But I'm lost to the feeling of my bonded partner thrusting into me with his thumb still rubbing against my sex. It's too much.

"Wait, what?" I ask as my body tenses, unsure if this is a game or not.

"Fuck, love. You're so tight when you're scared." Draco growls into my neck.

He picks up the pace, and my anxiety causes my nerve endings to pop. A shutter of exquisite tension slams into my core.

"Draco?!" I ask, pushing against his chest.

He lifts to kiss the tears from the corner of my eyes. "Shh!" He says as he pumps into me. "You're okay. I'm here," he repeats his first words of comfort to me from when I arrived in this confusing reality.

My body is on fire. I feel the pulsing rub of Draco's steady digit against my clit, the push, and pull of his assault on my sex, the sinful balance of pain and pleasure from the way he bends to suck on my sensitive nipple. I push against his chest again, but I'm confused, and I can't tell if I want him to stop. I'm scared and aroused and climbing higher and higher.

Draco lifts his head from my breast and growls, "Fuck, love. It's been a while since you've pawed at me like this. You've been so timid lately. I forgot how much I like it when you fight back."

Suddenly there are more tears in my eyes, and I'm coming apart. My body splinters into a thousand fractions and pieces. I'm terrified, weightless, free. I feel everything, every emotion, and at this moment, I couldn't care less about secret notes or memories. All I know is that I'm shattering against my partner's body as he roars his release.

Thick arms surround me as we come down. Draco pulls me into his embrace, and his wandless contraceptive charm causes a shiver to crawl over my stomach. He's breathing

heavily, and one arm is draped over his face. I watch his every move, wondering if I need to bolt to the dresser for my wand.

"Draco?" I ask with trepidation.

"Fuck, Hermione. I missed that." He says to the ceiling, and I feel my skin start to crawl.

In the afterglow of our sweaty bodies, I'm terrified of what he may have just admitted.

I try to pull out from under him to put some distance between us and think straight, but he holds on tight.

"Draco, let me up." I demand.

"Hey," he grabs my wrist and pulls my hand to his lips. I shake as he places a kiss on my palm. "I'm sorry." He pulls my arm up to his neck. "Are you okay? You know I wasn't serious, right?"

I feel a crack in my armor at his words and gentle tone. "You — you weren't?"

"No, baby, gods!" He pulls me onto his chest and holds me in his iron grasp. "I'm sorry. Did I really scare you? It's just how we used to fuck. You used to want me to toss you around and rough you up a bit. It was inconsiderate of me."

His hold penetrates my hard exterior, and I feel myself sinking back into the confusing pull of our bond. I'm exhausted from the night's events. Everything feels too heavy.

"Don't, worry, love. I'll make things right," he says while stroking the back of my head. "Get some sleep. We'll talk more tomorrow."

I'm overcome with the intensity of everything I learned and experienced and fall asleep to the measured breathing of the man who now causes me to question everything.

When I wake up in the morning, my head hurts. Draco is gone for the day, and I'm left alone in our room. I rub the sleep from my eyes and try to push away the pit in my stomach. I'm completely tied in knots. As I stretch and start to sit up, I notice two objects on the bedside table.

I pick up the closest item and gape at the smiling faces of my husband and me. We're beaming at one another on a cliffside, overlooking a beautiful valley of trees. I'm wearing a simple white dress, and Draco is in a pair of dark pants and a collared shirt. There's a note left with the photo in Draco's handwriting.

Here's your proof, love. Our wedding. Three years ago on Grasmoor. Forgive me for last night, I got carried away.

My lips pull upward in a tight smile. The photo means a lot to me, and I already know that I'll spend the rest of the day scouring its many details.

I lift my eyes, take in the second object and feel my anxiety kick up again. My copy of *Hogwarts: A History* lays open. I pull the familiar text from the table and stare in shock at the perfectly intact title page.

Chapter End Notes

What's going on and when will Hermione find out more answers? Next chapter she'll learn more about the wizarding world but will she like what she discovers?

Chapter 3: Doors

Chapter Summary

"Oh no, how did I manage to lose me?
I am not this desperate, not this crazy
There's no way I'm sticking around to find out
I won't lose like that, I won't lose myself."
-How Do You Sleep, Sam Smith

Three days passed since I woke up and found the picture of Draco and me at our wedding.

I sit cross-legged on an uncomfortable, high-backed chair in our entrance hall. As I stare at the front doors the pokey-bits from the filigree and ornate flowers that make up the chair's artistry push into my back. I'm newly obsessed with the gateway to our Manor.

It's tricky, though. Sometimes I have to pretend like I'm doing other things. Like, when Millie walks by, I have to act like I'm particularly interested in some piece of art hanging in the atrium.

"Mrs?" She asked just the other day when she first caught me here. "Is you needing something?"

She was doing that thing again where she pulls at the corners of her smock pockets. I've realized it's a tell of hers for when she's nervous.

"Oh no, I'm fine," I offered, hoping that she'd move along. But when she didn't, I added with a smile, "Isn't the tile work lovely?" I tilted my head toward the border along the marble floors. Then, as if I had no care in the world, I leaned over and whispered in a breathy tone, "I could spend hours staring at all of the intricate details in the stone."

The double doors to the Manor are some dark species of wood. I consider them while clutching our wedding photo and nearly rubbing a hole in its center with my thumb. The photographic representations of Draco and I keep scowling at me as I disturb their romantic moment.

The doors are opulent, like everything in our home. Right in the middle are two gold handles, one for each, and I find myself so engrossed with what it would be like to leave the Manor that I can almost feel their weight in my palm.

Over the past year, I've walked through this atrium hundreds of thousands of times. I've sauntered to and from the library or back and forth from the kitchens countless times a day and rarely paid the doors any attention.

Now though, when Draco's at work, I can't help myself obsessing over all the possible worlds beyond our garden gates.

I've decided I need to find out.

Draco worked late the day he left me the picture. I was already in bed when he came home that evening. I heard him open our bedroom door and his boots stomp across the rug as I clutched the sheets underneath my chin, staring wide-eyed at the wall. He undressed, then lit the fire before pulling the covers off me, causing my skin to crawl with each inch exposed to the cold. Next, his hands slid under my shirt, and his fingers ghosted my nipples.

There's been no further conversation about truth, lies, or sexual preferences. I still find it curious that the former me harbored some kind of rape fantasy. Though, the only other option is that Draco—.

After that thought, I scrunch my eyes tight and ball my fingers into fists. The photo crinkles, and its inhabitants duck to the sides of the frame. I hate that possibility.

Truth be told, though, how he took me that night does cause my palms to sweat and my knickers to moisten. Nothing about my life makes sense now. Things seem to have gone back to normal. But I don't feel normal anymore.

I'm torn apart inside. Whenever Draco touches me, I feel the tension building between my shoulders. I can't tell if the *real* Draco is the one that's tender and kind or the one he showed me the other night—the one who liked it when I "fought back."

There's an ache to be with him when he's gone that I've grown used to over the past year. It rests beneath my ribs, but now it's clouded with a myriad of dangerous possibilities. When he's home, though, it's an entirely different story. We go about our lives as if nothing's changed, and when he drags his hands along my shoulders or massages my neck or kisses me, I lose myself to his pull. My mind becomes muddled.

Sitting in this chair, I find clarity. For example, I've gone back through all of my memories of walking out to the gardens together and realized that Draco opened the doors every time. I'm deadly curious about whether I'll be able to move the heavy wood.

Yesterday I decided to test my plan, so I walked up and placed the back of my forearm near the handle. I didn't feel any hum of magic, so I may be able to open the doors myself, but I worry that Draco will know.

Today's my chance. This morning at breakfast, Draco told me that he would be in a day-long meeting and unreachable. He kissed my head before walking out of the dining room, and I knew it was my moment.

I cast a tempest. It's 11:30 in the morning, and I know that Millie and the rest of the house-elves will be hard at work finishing up the preparations for lunch. So, taking one last look to my left and right to verify that the halls are clear, I jump up from the seat where I've sat for hours and make my way across the floor.

I grab the gold handle, and, as I hoped, the door opens. Of course, it opens, Hermione! I scold myself. Draco's never said that I can't go outside. I've explored the gardens several times with him or Millie. But there was still a strong suspicion on my part that I'd find myself locked here.

I click the door shut before scurrying across the pea gravel path to the next challenge. As I near the iron gate, my heart starts beating faster. I just need to see for myself. I'll be back by

dinner. I'm a grown-ass witch. I can go for a walk if I want to!

The staccato of the gravel under my feet starts to pick up in speed as I race to leave our property. I can't tell if I'm running to drum up my courage after spending a year hidden away in recovery or if I feel like somebody might actually chase me. Either way, I want to see the outside world before I'm forced to turn back.

As I near the gate, a potent memory overtakes me. It was my fourth month here, and Draco walked me into the grounds for the first time.

"How are you doing?" He asked while tucking me into his side for warmth.

"Fine," I admitted, though preoccupied. It was wonderful to be outside. I noticed the signs of magic everywhere—in the wards around the property or the warming charm Draco placed across my shoulders. I loved recognizing the magic's signature.

Draco's face fell—irritated as if I disappointed him.

"What's wrong?" I asked, noticing the change in the air. I didn't like feeling as though I had let him down.

"It's nothing," he sighed, running his hands up and down my arms. "You just never used to lie to me."

"Huh?" I asked.

Draco stopped walking and pulled my cloak around me tighter. "I know you're terrified. I can feel your emotions through our bond."

I tried to catalog my feelings, noticing curiosity, anxiety, and excitement. No fear.

"No really, I'm fine." I tried to reassure him.

The air was crisp, and it felt good to be out of the house. However, I wanted to see the world and figure out if any additional stimuli might cause me to remember things from my past.

I brushed my hair behind my ear, saying, "I'm excited to be out in the real world again, I promise!"

As a breeze of chilly air swept passed us, Draco gave me a knowing look. He stopped my hand and held my fingers to my chest, declaring, "You always play with your hair when trying to convince me of something. We used to laugh about it together." He bent and kissed my temple, drawing me into his arms again. "You don't have to push yourself to please me. I want you to see Wizarding England again, desperately. But, if you're not ready, it's okay."

I was confused. Draco's embrace was lovely. Maybe he was right, and the excitement I felt was his. Perhaps I *was* afraid.

We made it within a foot of the gate before I stopped and swallowed, darting my eyes around the yard then whispering, "You—you might be right, Draco. I'm not sure I'm ready."

Draco smiled and drew me back to the Manor, consoling me along the way, "It's okay, love. We can try another time."

I scowl at the memory, more confident than ever that I wasn't afraid that day but unsure what Draco was trying to achieve. I feel more pressure to leave our property and see the world for myself. I just need to make sure Draco doesn't find out.

I've never seen him mad per se, but I've always had this feeling that his anger is something I'd like to avoid. He always seems so controlled—calm, but sometimes there's a coldness behind his eyes that causes my nerves to tingle.

Just a quick in and out! I'll Apparate to Diagon Alley like Draco does several times a week and be back before anyone notices I'm gone.

I feel the thick iron under my hand as I push on the gate, but it dissolves at my touch.

Well, that was easy!

Stepping out onto the dirt road, I worry that the next part might prove harder. I only need to Apparate to a place I have no memory of. No big deal!

Hoping my body remembers the way so that I don't splinch myself, I scrunch my eyes, focusing on the words *Diagon Alley*! I've seen pictures of splinched wizards in our library books, and the condition looks painful! Of course, I want to avoid that at all costs, but my curiosity is stronger today than my self-preservation.

Diagon Alley

Diagon Alley

Diagon Alley!

I twist and feel the wind in my hair. Then, before I open my eyes, I notice the change. The air here smells spoiled like rotten eggs or fish, and there's several people talking nearby.

A sigh of relief rumbles through my chest as I open one eye after another to take in the sight. It's just like the pictures in the Daily Prophet. I sometimes catch a glimpse of the news on Draco's desk. Unfortunately, though, he's always quick to usher me away.

There are lines of shops with thatched roofs that stretch along the street and windows showcasing potion supplies, robes, and bird cages. I steady myself and walk down the road, headed to Flourish and Blotts. Draco often brings me books from the store, but I'm curious if I can find something on the Wizarding War. He says nothing's been written yet.

As I move through the throngs of people, I notice something that turns my stomach. I see aristocratic women in elaborate silk robes who pay me little attention and men. Several dangerous-looking men storm around. Some even drag women behind them on chains.

What the hell!?

The chained women look desperate and lost, their eyes sunken and unfocused and their clothes tattered-skimpy. My skin starts to prickle, and I feel nauseated as one of them turns to look at me. Confusion crosses her features as she takes in my appearance. It feels like she knows me.

Shocked, I duck into the nearby bookshop and run to the counter. "Please, are there— a—any books on the recent war?" I stammer, tripping over my words. I want to sate my curiosity and then get back home. This place feels wrong.

"Merlin's balls!" The cashier growls at me as his eyes slither over my appearance. Instantly, I feel the urge to run. I dash toward the door headed to the Apparition point.

This was a bad idea. I need to get back to Draco and demand some answers. *Fuck!*

"Mudblood! Where da' ell' do ya' think yer goin'?" He magically locks the door as I reach it. "Where's yer owner?"

The gnarled man comes around the corner and stalks towards me as I yank on the handle. Great, *this door* won't open for me!

I reach for my wand, yelling, "Stay away from me!"

He chuckles and keeps moving in my direction. I hear his ragged breathing and smell his foul breath as he approaches. He mumbles, "Second damn time in a month." Then louder adds, "Come ere' girly," he says as he grabs at me.

"Alohamora," I stammer, tapping the handle, but nothing happens. I need to get out of here. This isn't safe. My heart hammers in my chest as I try in vain to formulate a plan. Then there's a *Crack!* and the man is flying backward. He rights himself before falling but grabs the counter for support — eyes wide in fear.

Draco stands in the middle of the room, spitting fire. His wand is pointed at the cashier, and he looks murderous.

"You forget yourself." He sneers at the older man.

"Oi! Calm down, Sir. I's just checking to make sure she wasn't no imposter."

Before my brain fully appreciates that Draco came and I might be safe, he grabs my upper arm, yanking me forward.

"Hey!" I exclaim as he wrenches up my hair and holds it in a vice-like grip. "Draco, what are you—?"

He taps my neck with his wand, then snarls, "Satisfied?" They're both looking at something on my skin, and I watch a nervous confirmation pass over the cashier's face.

"Sorry, Sir." He says to his shoes.

I've had enough!

I lash out at Draco, pulling from his iron grip and spitting, "Get off! What are you doing!?"

His head whips around, and he speaks to me for the first time since he arrived, "Calm down before I immobilize you," His ire is bone-chilling. I instantly freeze. He's never treated me like this before.

"D-Draco?" My voice breaks, feeling betrayed.

His eyes dart to two other men standing in the corner like hulking statues. "Take her home and seal the wards!"

"Draco—?" I say again, but he cuts me off.

"Not another word," he demands in his icy tone, and I dare not disobey him. I have to get back to the Manor—to safety.

The men march me back to the Apparition point, but I flail and yell as they manhandle me. I'm pissed! Something's clearly wrong. I want to get home, but I don't like being thrown around. So, out of spite, I throw out a Jinx that sparks and flares—intending to pry the men off me. Though unfortunately, it misses and hits a wooden crate nearby. The discarded box ignites into a mess of smoke and flames.

Everyone on the road turns and stares.

The hold on my arm tightens as one of the henchmen growls, pulling me away. When we arrive home, they shove me through the gates of the Manor and lock me in. Furious, I storm up the path into the house and then run to an empty room on the third floor before collapsing into tears.

Several hours later, I'm still staring at the stucco ceiling when I hear the front door slam.

Everything is so out of place. I'm desperate to know what happened in the war and who were all those women. Not to mention, what Draco pointed to on my neck!?

I rub at the skin behind my hair for the millionth time but feel nothing. I need answers, but I'm afraid of losing myself to the pull of the bond when I approach him. I need to think through this carefully.

"Where is she?" Draco's livid voice carries through the Manor.

"In her room, Sir " Millie squeaks. She sounds terrified.

"I want her downstairs by dinnertime!"

My brows furrow as I listen in. *My room?* I've never stepped foot into this unused guest room before. I slam my fists down on the mattress, growling in frustration. Then I flip over, curling into a tight ball on my side. Tears continue to slide down my face as I consider my predicament. I know nothing about myself. I don't know anything about the world. I'm tied to a man who I think I love but at the same time can no longer trust. I don't even know if I can trust myself anymore. My feelings betray me daily.

I need to find out more information.

I wallow for a few more minutes before sliding my feet off the bed and casting a Tempest. It's 4:47 P.M. We often eat at 6:30 P.M., so that gives me a bit of time before I'll be expected to interact with anyone.

The front doors open and shut again, and I hear deep voices in the hall. Determining that this might be my opportunity to learn more, I make my way to the bedroom door and slink out into the hallway. If I can crouch down at the top of the massive front stairwell, I should be able to hear Draco's conversation.

The wide steps double back and forth, leaving my spot on the third floor hidden from view, even though I stop next to the white marble railing.

"People saw. Someone talked," says a male voice I don't recognize.

There's a long pause and a muffled sound I don't quite catch. They must be in Draco's office. I hear him growl in response, but it doesn't sound like they're standing in the atrium.

"Spit it out, Blaise. What does he want?"

"He's requesting another presentation," the man named Blaise responds. Even from several floors up, I can hear the way he gloats.

"Requesting. Right," Draco says in a clipped response. There's another long pause before he asks, "When and where?"

"This Friday at the Revel."

I hear glass shatter and the crackle of a fire. Draco must've thrown his tumbler into the flames.

"I'll see myself out," Blaise offers, then I hear footsteps across the entrance hall and the door again.

I've never met any of Draco's visitors. Men occasionally come to speak with him, but he either meets them in the gardens or in his office. He's always clear that I should stay out of

sight. Draco says that if I see people I recognize before I'm fully recovered, it might cause setbacks and confusion.

Over the past year, I often wondered where my friends and family were—surely some people cared about me other than Draco. He always says that they were given strict orders by the Mind Healer to stay away until I was physically ready.

I clutch at the cold railing and feel my knuckles crack. I hate thinking about how many lies Draco may have told me over the past year. It's hard for me to articulate how completely I fell for him once I settled into our life together. In many ways, he was my perfect match. He was always available to hold me or talk for hours. We loved discussing magical theory together.

Draco insisted that we couldn't talk about the past yet, but made our present as beautiful as possible.

Eight months after I woke up here, he met me in the kitchens one morning as I stared out the windows. It was a cozy, rainy day, and the heat from the nearby bubbling cauldron sank into my bones.

"Those are brilliant, love," he said while sliding a hand around my waist from behind. I'd just conjured some bright blue flames in a jar. I liked the way their warmth and color contrasted with the wet gray landscape.

"Thank you," I smiled, tilting my head back to kiss his jaw.

"Your wand was in the library," he said while pulling it from his back pocket and placing it on the terracotta tile countertop. There was a delicious hint of praise in his tone that always caused me to melt. "You conjured those wandlessly?" he offered as more of a statement than a question as he kissed my neck.

"Mmhmm"

His hand dipped under the hem of my shirt and grazed my stomach, causing my knees to go weak. Then he turned me around and threaded his hand into my hair before looking at me with complete adoration and saying, "You're just as strong as ever. I love you. You're perfect."

Moments like that made me feel like the world could go to hell for all I cared. All I needed was the gorgeous man that held me in his arms.

I wipe away the memory and a tear as I grieve another loss. I have no one if Draco isn't who I thought he was.

I stand and start to make my way back to the guest room but stop when I hear Draco's deep voice.

"Hermione. Come here."

Chapter 4: Paralyzed

Chapter Summary

"I'm paralyzed
Where are my feelings?
I no longer feel things
I know I should
I'm paralyzed
Where is the real me?
I'm lost and it kills me, inside"
-Paralyzed, NF

Chapter Notes

You all are so amazing with your kudos and comments! I love the support! Thank you!!
You are the motivation I need to write and I appreciate you!!

This work is dark. This chapter contains public rape. Do not read if that bothers you.
Rape and extremely dubious consent are going to be a common theme in this piece. Be gentle with yourself and be warned.

I freeze at the top of the steps. Draco knows where I am. He knows I was listening.

I try to determine his mood before I show myself. When he came home this afternoon, I could tell from the bond that he was angry and determined, but this information from the visitor caused his new level of fury to climb up my back. Also, I take a deep breath and focus on his emotions. There's an undercurrent of anxiety. He's worried about something.

"Hermione—" he says, waiting on a response.

There's no more avoiding this confrontation. My tears dry up, and resolve settles in my spine. Fisting my wand, I draw upon an inner courage that feels intricately woven into my being. It's as though it was always within me, waiting to be called into action.

I stomp down the steps until I can see him at the bottom. He's standing in the atrium with his hands in his pockets, and his shirt sleeves rolled up. His tattoo moves as the muscles in his forearm tense.

"I'm not coming any closer until you give me some goddamned answers!" I snarl.

Draco doesn't respond except to raise an eyebrow at me and shift his jaw.

"I want to know what happened in Diagon Alley this morning." I start in, making my demands. "I want to know more about the war, and I want to know what really happened to me!" I'm sick of his evasion.

It feels so strange to be fighting with Draco. Over the past year, he's been my foundation, my compass. Even now, I see the way he holds himself, and it makes me want to smooth my hands along his cheek and release the tension in his gorgeous body.

"Come here, and I'll tell you everything, sweetheart," he says as he stalks up the steps—his voice silky and dangerous.

As much as I want to, I know that I can't give into him. I need to understand my circumstances better and can't put up with more lies or half-truths.

"Stay back!" I yell, pointing my wand at his chest. I can't let him get too close. I don't want the bond to take over and confuse the situation, knowing that I need to be able to think straight.

He continues to climb the stairs reminding me, "Hermione, you're pointing your wand at your husband. You know me. Let me explain."

The events of this afternoon are too raw. I'm not willing to live blind to the outside world anymore. The women I saw terrified me, and I can't get over how Draco treated me in the book shop. It's as if I can still feel his fingerprints on my arm from when he yanked me forward and fisted my hair.

"Am I?" I spit as I take a step back. Behind me, I hear a soft nose. My fried nerves cause me to spin around and investigate, but I know better than to take my eyes off Draco for long. Turning to face him again, I say with all the venom I can muster, "Or am I pointing my wand at my *owner*?"

There's another shuffling sound behind me, and I whip around again, catching sight of Millie with her arms outstretched. "Mrs. yous need to calm down," she warns.

My lips tighten, and my brows furrow as I take in her participation. Then, with a direct hit to my back, I feel Draco's spell spread over my shoulders and into my legs. I'm frozen, no longer able to move. Anger boils under my skin as he continues up the steps toward me.

When he reaches the top of the steps, he pauses, staring down at me. I can feel the energy pulsing and snapping between us and smell his delicious fragrance. Draco brushes my hair out of my eyes and says with an infuriating condescension, "You're right. I *am* your owner, sweetheart."

My insides tremble as I kick myself for letting him get the upper hand, and I wrack my brain for a way out of this situation. I worry that he'll Obliviate me like it seems that he's done several times before. But, unfortunately, no matter how much I want to put distance between us, I'm forced to stand there, unmoving, as he wipes the angry tear from my cheek and runs his hand up and down my arm.

"But, I'm also your husband—you're bound to me," he adds. Then, my insides coil with fear as he leans in to whisper, "and you like it better when we pretend."

I can't speak, so I let out a throaty growl as Draco grips my arm and Apparates us to our bedroom. This man is a stranger to me. I see no hint of my kind, patient husband in front of me. It's as though he's taken on a role. I refuse to believe that this is the real Draco.

When we land, he pries my wand from my hand before warding the door and then walking to the bar cart to grab a drink. He releases me from his hold, and I immediately run. The door is locked, and no amount of my wandless magic convinces it to open for me. I try setting fire to the wood with blue flames, but they smoke and die out.

Next, I race to the windows and try to force them open, but they don't budge either. Frantic now, I twist, trying to Apparate away, but without my wand, it's impossible, and not to mention, I have no idea where I could go and find safety.

Draco sips his drink and watches me from above the rim of his glass. He looks bored like he's waiting out my tantrum. I stop, breathing deep from my chest, and summon my courage again.

"Let me out, you Bastard, and give me back my wand!" I demand. I'm buying time, trying to formulate a plan. I can't let him get too close again. I don't want him touching me, and I certainly want to avoid him wiping my memories.

He says nothing. Draco sets down his glass and starts to cross the room.

"Don't come anywhere near me! And, don't you dare Obliviate me!" I yell, trying to get him to stop. I stumble backward and hold out my hands, feeling extremely vulnerable without my wand for protection.

"I won't," he agrees. "I'm done with that. I'm sick of chasing you back and forth from Diagon Alley, and this time you've made too big a scene."

His confirmation breaks my heart. I move to the windowsill and perch on the wide ledge in the corner. My world is crashing around me. My breathing starts to increase, and I clutch my chest in fear. My hands shake, and I worry that I'm coming undone.

"Hermione, you need to calm down," Draco warns.

"Fuck you!" I holler, trying in vain to catch my breath. I long to remember what happened to me, and I no longer harbor delusions that Draco will tell me. Instead, I scrunch my eyes and try to dig into my mind to unlock memories. Surely, they're in there somewhere. I need to find my way back to myself.

White-hot spikes of pain slice through my skull. "No!" I slam my hands to my forehead and keep looking. I'm shivering from everything I've learned and been exposed to today. Finding answers feels like my only way forward.

"Hermione—!" I hear Draco bark again as if he's far away.

I just need to push myself a bit further. My mind feels like I'm slamming up against an immovable fortress. I know my memories are locked behind it if I could just find my way in!

"AH!" I scream out in agony as the pain becomes too much.

"Hermione! Damn it!" I hear him bellow. Then everything goes black.

I wake but don't open my eyes yet. From the thick blackness covering my eyelids, I can tell that it's nighttime. All the fear and anxiety I felt before is gone. I lay, surrounded by the warmth of our bed, the down comforter holds me, and I feel my body heat radiate as if I've been asleep for some time. Everything feels right again. My heart rate is regulated, and my skin no longer crawls. Maybe it was all a bad dream.

I snuggle deeper towards the source of my peace and feel at ease as a large hand brushes over my hair and down my back. There's no better feeling than laying here in this soft comfort.

I open my eyes and take in the scene. It's dark, but I can see Draco's outline as he sits on the bed next to me, where I'm curled into him.

Realization hits me, and I whine, "No, no, no!" as I tuck my face into the sheets.

"Shh, hey," Draco says in the soothing tone I'm used to hearing.

The bond plucks between us as if we're anchored to one another. His hold feels right and perfect, but I know in the deepest part of my consciousness that I can't trust this feeling anymore.

"You were out for a few days," he says as his hand stills on my hip. "Are you okay? How do you feel?" His fingers tighten, and his voice lowers. Then, he adds, "You know that you can't push yourself like that."

"Draco, please," I beg.

I can't understand what he said. It seems like I just passed out. However, I take stock of my emotions and feel the confirmation in my body's call to his. If it *has* been days, we haven't gone this long without making love in almost a year.

Draco always told me that if we didn't have sex, the bond would make us crazy with lust. He talked about how hard it was for him during the month I was in a coma—said he was nearly delirious with want.

He explained it to me one day after a particularly lengthy round of afternoon sex. It was about six months ago, and I laid content in his arms, feeling our naked bodies against one another.

"I thought you had an important meeting today?" I teased.

Draco had surprised me by showing up in the middle of the day, pulling me out of the kitchens with a sly smile to the house-elves and not even making it to our bedroom. Instead,

he took me on the middle of the broad front steps, then Apparated us back to our bedroom and caused me to scream out his name in satisfaction as he sucked on my clit until he was hard again.

"The pull was too strong," He said while rolling on his back and settling me onto his chest.

I threw my hair over my shoulder and rested my chin on my hands, laughing as I said, "Surely, the bond wasn't too much for my strong, handsome, husband."

Draco grabbed the back of my head and growled in pleasure, "I waited months while you were sick and learning to be comfortable around me again. When you finally touched my arm, I nearly came right there while reading," his eyes were intense, and his admission made me blush. He kissed my forehead, then flopped back again and said to the ceiling, "Now that you've come back to me, I'm not going to push myself to wait again."

Thinking back over that day, I never knew whether he was serious, but I also didn't care. I was more than happy to respond to his advances. Though now I know he wasn't lying. Draco says it's only been a few days, and my insides feel like they're on fire. My need for him is so acute it hurts.

When I realize how desperate I am for him to fuck me, I can't tell if my 'please' was to get him to leave me alone or sate my need.

I hear him give a dark chuckle. "Please, what, love? How can I help?"

It takes everything in me to fight against the current of my desire dragging me to him. "Please—leave me alone," I whisper, curling tighter into a ball.

There's a very long pause as I feel Draco's anger shift and roll within him.

Eventually, he says, "We're going out." He lets that sink in, then admits, "Tonight isn't going to be easy for you."

I sigh. That sounds ominous—horrible. I don't understand why Draco would force me to go anywhere now. I need to sleep.

"I'll give you two options," he tilts his head toward the bedside table and offers, "You can either take that concentrated calming draught, or you can ask me to Imperious you."

His words hang in the air as a heavy threat.

"Neither will allow you to disassociate from the evening's activities completely," he continues. "But I'll be honest. Either would be a better option than nothing." He stares at the wall for a moment, then asks, "So which do you choose?"

"W—where are we going?" I stammer, trying to figure out what he means.

Draco doesn't respond. Instead, he waits for me to make a selection.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I say into my pillow. I'm bone-weary, and I just want some peace and quiet.

"Hermione," he says, leaning over me with his hand on my back. "We both know that isn't true."

He waits for a beat before asking again, "Now, which one do you prefer?"

"Fuck you!" I bolt up and yell.

Draco ignores my outburst. He pushes on his knees to stand, then walks to the door. "Take a shower," he orders. "I left an outfit for you in the closet. We leave in an hour."

Before he enters the hall, he turns and says, "Don't try anything stupid, I've still got your wand. If you haven't taken the potion by the time I get back then I'll assume you chose the Unforgivable."

The door clicks shut, and I feel anger, shame, and desperation. I rub the linen sheets between my fingers, trying to ground myself in the peace this bed used to represent.

I'm wandless in a dangerous world. My skin crawls from how lost I feel without the safety net that Draco used to represent. A sick part of me wishes I could go back to the night I found the message in my book. I wish I had gone up to bed with Draco that night and never found out this dark world existed. He's right. I *was* happier pretending. Though, I can't change the past. I've seen behind the veil, and there's no going back.

I hug my arms to my chest and hang my head but get a whiff of myself. I'm sweaty from several days' sleep. Feeling that I have no better option now, I make my way to the ensuite' hoping that a shower will provide clarity.

I feel just as lost as before but a bit refreshed when I exit. I wrap myself in a thick towel and walk back into the room, noticing someone changed the sheets while I washed. The sight makes me angry all over again. It's as if everyone is out to erase me. Nothing ever stays the same from moment to moment.

The potion still waits on the bedside table, so I scowl at it and walk to the closet to dress. Inside, where there used to be rows of clothes, there now hangs just one dress. It's light gray and knee-length, cinched in the center with a tan, braided belt. My heart sinks. It's what the chained women in Diagon Alley wore. I refuse to put it on and begin to hunt for anything else to wear.

Not a scrap of fabric is left in sight. Draco's clothes are even gone. Frustrated, I storm back to the bathroom to retrieve my dirty clothes but find they vanished as well. I growl out in anger, clutching my hair, and lean against the countertop.

Staring at myself in the mirror's reflection, I realize I look beaten down—washed out. I don't recognize myself.

I shake off my devastation and remind myself that I'm a warrior. Draco even says so. I'm not going down without a fight. I give myself one more minute to breathe, then head back to the closet, throw on the dress and march to the bedside table.

If the Draco I love is still around at all, then he was trying to warn me to prepare for this evening. I don't know what's to come, but I know that I'd rather be calm and in control than at the mercy of anyone else.

I grab the potion, pop the cork, and down the bottle. It tastes sweet and tingles in my throat. I may be at a significant disadvantage, but I plan to keep my eyes open tonight and find a way to help myself.

An hour later, I follow Draco through the dark halls of a gothic estate. He's wearing an eerie military uniform I've never seen him in before. Loud music plays in a banquet hall nearby, and I hear several men laughing. To my recollection, this is the first time he's taken me out of the Manor. From the sounds of this party, I should be very nervous. Except, I chose to drink a calming draught strong enough to soothe an angry Hippogriff. So instead, I'm gazing dewy-eyed at the surroundings as I follow in Draco's wake.

My mind wanders. This place isn't so bad. I grin with my mouth hanging open at the pretty hills dotting the landscape outside of the windows. So what if Draco forced me to wear this outfit. It's cozy. I can handle anything. I'm Hermione Malfoy! Hermione— uh— well—I'm Hermione! Huh, I wonder what my maiden name was before my lovely husband forced me into this marriage, bound me to him for eternity, and wiped my memory. Ah, well, who needs to know.

My arms feel lighter than usual, and I look down at my feet as I walk, picking them up higher than strictly necessary and feeling their weight. Draco turns and looks me over with a scowl. He has such beautiful eyes—silver and sharp like diamonds.

We stop in front of the double doors that lead to the raucous party, and Draco gives me a stern once over. His eyebrows furrow as he reaches into his holster and pulls out his wand. Then,

he waves it in midair, and a long chain appears before me.

"Chin, up, love," he orders.

NOOOO! Something yells from the deepest reaches of my mind, but I simply smile as he attaches the chain to a collar around my neck.

I look down at the metal and tug a few times, listening to the gentle clinking noise it makes. Isn't that fun.

"Now listen,"

Draco sounds grumpy. I tilt my head and stare as he continues.

He waves his wand in my face, and I feel the spell take hold. "You *will not* make a scene, fight back, or try anything cute when being interrogated."

Huh, he Imperiused me. I wonder why? I took the potion as he asked. I was good. "I will not make a scene, fight back, or try anything cute, when I'm being interrogated," I repeat mindlessly.

He takes another long look, and I see the freckle on his jaw—the one I always kiss because it makes him shiver with want. I like that I can make him happy like that.

"Draco?" I ask, lifting my hand to hold his jaw. He's so beautiful, so strong.

Draco turns away from me and opens the door. As we enter, the music gets louder, but the voices halt. There's several hundred people in this banquet hall. Angry-looking men congregate in the center of the room holding witches to their sides and sloshing mead over one another as they talk. Others have women pressed to the walls. They rut into the witches, and I see breasts hanging from ripped dresses, bouncing as they thrust, and legs wrapped

around hips. A few men hold the back of a witches' head as she serves them on her knees. Everyone is drinking.

This is a silly place to make love.

I watch in horror from behind my potion-addled brain. I feel disgusted by the way the men treat these poor witches, but I'm helpless to do anything but smile and stare. It's an odd sort of out-of-body experience. Draco was right. The potion didn't remove me altogether, but it dulls my senses to the sight before me.

Draco tugs me forward and barks, "Let's go Mudblood! Get moving!"

I smile at him and do as I'm told, but on the inside, I'm screaming. Something is very wrong. He's never used such foul language with me. As he approaches a throne, I lift my eyes from his feet, taking in the sight of a Monstrous-looking man.

"You wanted to see her again, Sir." Draco says

Inside I war with myself. The part of me affected by the potion watches the men talk with mild curiosity while my true self wants to steal a wand and run for the exit.

"I hear she's been fighting your hold recently, Draco. Are you sure you have her under control."

Draco's shoulders tense. "She's not a threat, Lord. I assure you," he says with a tight jaw. "— Just likes to throw a fit every now and then."

"Hmm, and you're sure she doesn't remember anything yet," the horrible man asks, looking dangerous. His skin is pasty-white, and he hangs over the throne as if he's bored.

"Positive, My Lord," Draco responds. "From time to time her Gryffindor fight shows itself and she remembers that I've imprisoned her, but that's it. Nothing yet from the final battle or earlier."

I turn to look at Draco, curious. Then, smiling, my stupid self asks, "What final battle?"

"Silence!" the scary man orders, and I'm suddenly on my knees, choking for air.

This is bad, this is bad, what can I do!?

Draco towers over me, holding the end of my chain, staring at me with shaking eyes. I can't make out his expression as I'm too busy clutching my throat.

"Sir?" He interjects after a moment, then turns to the man whose torturing me and says, "Let me show you. If you'll let her up, you can see that she's still unaware. Then, I'll take her away, so she doesn't disturb you further."

Air rushes to my lungs, and I'm floating to the throne. My arms and legs lay limp in the air as I arrive in front of the angry wizard. I'm terrified but still under the influence of the potion and spell.

Then everything starts to hurt.

The *Lord*, as Draco called him, is slicing through my head, pulling forth memory after memory and slamming into the same mental barrier I've been unable to break. He flings aside tender moments from weeks earlier of Draco and I laughing together in the library or bitter struggles I wrestled with when I realized Draco lied to me. He's looking for something, and all I can do is lay limp in the air as I listen to the distant sounds of a witch screaming in agony. I think it might be me.

He searches for what feels like an eternity before throwing me to the ground.

I lay with my cheek to the stone floor, taking in ragged pulls of air as a tear slides down my nose. My eyes are glued to the many boots standing around the room. I see pity in the faces of the captive witches at the back of the room. They stare at me, and even though Draco fed me a tranquilizer meant to keep me calm, I'm flooded with devastation.

"You *love* the Mudblood?" I hear the vicious monster jeer above me, but I lay still.

"Of course not, My Lord. Though it's easier to let her believe such," Draco's voice sounds over me. "—that way she fights less when I fuck her."

"Well, then Draco. Go on, that's sounds entertaining."

There's a pause as I feel Draco's anxiety spike.

"Lord?" he says after a long silence.

"Go on. *Fuck her* I think the men here would like to see this famous Mudblood bitch put in her place."

No! gods!

I'm lifted into the air again before I can gather the strength to move. My arms raise above my head, and I hang, suspended in the air as if by invisible ropes.

There is a long pause then Draco clears his throat behind me as I hear him approach. He places a hand over my throat and presses my back to his front. I feel a shaky breath in his chest then he whispers in my ear.

"Close your eyes, love. You're okay. I'm here with you."

His words transport me back to my first few months at the Manor. Despite how happy I was with Draco, I often had moments when my anxiety picked up, and I couldn't stop worrying about my memory loss. Each time that happened, Draco was there to help.

We were sitting together in the library by the fire one such night. I draped my feet over his lap as Draco read to me about the Wizarding government. Suddenly, a wave of sadness came over me. The evening was pleasant. We'd spent hours together talking and laughing, but at the moment, I felt quiet and began to fidget with my wand. Draco noticed the change in my demeanor and quickly scooped me into his arms. He placed my head on his shoulder and soothed me by saying the same words. "Close your eyes, love. You're okay. I'm here with you."

Tears ran down my face as I said, "I'm sorry, Draco, I'm being silly."

"Hermione, you've been through so much. Even strong witches like you get to be sad sometimes."

"It's nothing to do with you. I'm happy we're together," I said, trying to explain myself.

"I know that," he smiled.

"—It's just that I have a hard time imagining so much of what you read to me. Some things still feel so foreign," I admitted into Draco's shoulder.

He kissed the top of my head and said, "No matter what, we're in this together, okay?"

"Okay,"

His comfort always had the power to draw me back to the moment and slow my raging nerves. Several of those moments occurred over the year, and he'd offer the same words of

reassurance each time. *"Close your eyes, love. You're okay. I'm here with you."*

The men in the room are staring at me as I hang in front of them. Several wolf-whistle, and I see one dip his hand into his pants to fist his cock.

"Draco, please—," I beg for the second time tonight before doing as he bade and closing my eyes to the scene before me.

"Shh, good girl," he praises.

"Get on with it!" the Monster growls, casting a spell to rip open my shirt and expose my breast.

Draco places his large hand over my chest, kneading it and hiding my nakedness from view. Then, with shaky hands, he lifts my skirt over my hips.

My mind goes blank with fear. I'm powerless over what is happening to my body.

I feel Draco's racing heartbeat, sense his anxiety, then hear his belt buckle and zipper as I try to slow my breathing. This isn't happening. This isn't happening.

He takes another deep breath then brushes my hair over my shoulder and bends to kiss my neck. "You're okay. I'm here with you, Hermione," he whispers into my skin.

The men continue to jeer as Draco clears his throat then presses into me. My desire bubbled under my skin all night because of the bond, but even so, he has to pause to cast a lubrication spell.

I'm a mess of fear and emotions. Still, under the potion's influence, I feel dull to the severity of this horrific moment, but I'm aware. I know this is wrong, and I know I can't stop it.

He pushes in further, and I scream.

"Stop! Please!"

"Yeah! Plow the Potter-loving wench!" A disgusting man yells. Several others laugh in return.

Draco picks up the speed, and I feel myself go numb. I cry out again in an unintelligent grunt.

"Listen to the whore! That's what it's like to be fucked by a real man, you Mudblood filth!"

"Bet those Order of the Phoenix fucks couldn't even get properly hard!"

The men continue to heckle as Draco grunts behind me. He thrusts a few more times, then comes. At least it was quick.

"Good job, son." The Monster sneers, then adds, "Get her out of my sight." The music picks up as I hang in midair, paralyzed with the trauma of what just happened to me. The men begin drinking again and grabbing at the women nearby. It seems the show caused a renewed frenzy.

The invisible cords that hold me snap, and I begin to fall. Though Draco catches me, and before I know it, he's mended my clothes while ushering me out of the hall. I stare with empty eyes as he drags me away, then pulls me into a fireplace and growls, "Malfoy Manor!"

The potion is gone. I'm blank to the world spinning around me. I feel no sense of relief when we arrive back home.

Draco whisks me up the stairs, then lays me on our bed before curling his body around mine and whispering, "You did it, Hermione. That was the worst of it. It's over."

Chapter 5: Escape

Chapter Summary

"I found peace in your violence
Can't show me there's no point in trying
I'm at one, and I've been quiet for too long
I found peace in your violence
Can't show me there's no point in trying
I'm at one, and I've been silent for too long"
-Silence, Marshmello feat. Khalid

Chapter Notes

I want to write back to every single one of you for your encouraging, insightful, thoughtful comments. Thank you!! I read each and every one of them and smile at your wonderings or feel inspired by your assumptions. Please keep up the conversations! You are wonderful!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

I sleep for what feels like an eternity. My dreams are plagued with jeering men and the sad eyes of captive witches—torture and laughing. I realize Draco left the bed at some point because the loss of his body heat causes me to shiver and more tears to fall. I flop about in the bed to get away from the Monster in my dreams.

"She is needing proper medical attention, Sir." I hear a voice through my delirium.

"No—," a deeper tone offers. There's a long pause. "I don't want her crowded by strangers. We know she's reacting to the trauma and detoxing from the spells and potion. Do your best to keep her comfortable."

Potter-loving

Order of the Phoenix fucks

A tiny hand wipes a cloth over my forehead, and I flinch, peering through the haze of my confusion. Draco's strong back is to me as he stares out of the window with a scowl. He sighs and hangs his head before I drift back off to a fitful sleep.

I wake a few times to take a sip of water from a gentle hand but then rest my head back on the pillow and roll to my side to burrow into the warmth of the blankets.

At some point, I start to feel a new kind of heat. It reminds me of my first month at the Manor when I was consumed by Draco, drawn to him with the need to touch and feel and know more. Back then, I thought it was a deep curiosity or a need to feel connected again to my former self. Now I know it's the bond. Even in my sleep, I try to bury my desire, remembering the last time Draco took me.

As time passes, I become more lucid. It takes nothing to pull me from my dreams, and I feel shame each time as I wake to find myself rubbing my thighs together under the sheets. I can't want Draco anymore, not after what happened.

Finally, I decide to give in to the fading slumber. I blink as I open my eyes and rub the sleep dust from my tear ducts. The room is dark, though I can tell that it's dusk from the soft light outside.

I'm alone.

I take a shuddered breath and hug my arms to my chest, feeling my sensitive nipples brush my thin t-shirt. The closet door is open. Someone returned all the clothes, and the sight causes me to squeeze my eyes shut in anger. The smell of lavender catches my attention. There's a cup of tea waiting for me next to a tray of colorful potion bottles.

Steeling myself for what's to come, I rub an ache from the back of my neck, noticing my desire sing over my body before croaking, "M—Millie?"

The little elf arrives with a quick *Pop!*

"Yous awake," she squeaks. "Good— good."

My lips pull tight, and I scrunch my features as I say, "I'm starving."

Inside, I'm empty, and it's from more than the lack of food. I'm furious with Millie, which I bet she can tell, but she nods, saying,

"Of course, Mrs."

After she leaves, I shift and place my feet on the floor, curious to gauge my strength. I put weight on my right foot, steadying myself before pushing up to grab the bedpost for support. My legs feel like jelly as if only Draco can return my strength. Damnit.

I'm overcome with the sudden need to relieve myself, so once I'm sure I can walk, I make my way to the loo. As I shuffle through the room, I notice several books, a cashmere throw, and a glass tumbler by the chair near the window. It seems as if someone's been camped out for a while, watching over me. The thought pisses me off.

When I exit the restroom, Millie's back with a small soup tureen of vegetable beef stew, a warmed bowl, and thick slices of sourdough bread with pads of butter melting on them.

My stomach rumbles at the sight of the delicious food, so I pull up a chair to the desk where she places the meal. After settling myself, I ladle the fragrant broth and chunky meat and veg into my bowl. Next, I rip off a hunk of the bread and begin to eat.

Millie hovers near the corner with her hands behind her back, and I eye her with suspicion.

I can't fall apart. It's just me now. I no longer have anyone to lean on for help and support.

"Where's Draco?" My question sounds funny over a mouthful of food, but I don't care.

I want to eat to build up my strength to prepare for our next interaction. I'm going to need all my wits about me to escape. This place isn't safe, not after—. I set down the food and run my palm over my eye. Thinking back to the party makes me sick to my stomach.

"Master left. I is not knowing when he will return," she says, cataloging my appearance.

I narrow my eyes at her and then force myself to sip the stew again. Though my nerves are shot, I appreciate its savory comfort.

"How long was I out?" I ask, continuing my interrogation. I need to know as much as possible to arm myself for the upcoming battle.

Millie pauses. It looks as though she's checking in with some internal compass. "Ten days."

I puff my cheeks out in a sardonic laugh. I seem to be skilled at sleeping days away. No wonder I'm dripping with want. I push those desires down as far as I can, knowing that they're dangerous for my autonomy.

Millie continues, "Your accident be making it harder for you to recovers from—" She hesitates. "From—the mental exertion."

I look at her through my lashes and rest my elbows on the desk. I raise an eyebrow and purse my lips, staring her down, knowing she's uncomfortable under my gaze.

Finally, I ask, "Where's my wand?"

Millie shifts her weight. She pulls at her pockets and lowers her ears. "Master said he will discuss that matter with you himself."

Anger washes over me, but the thought of seeing Draco causes my stomach to churn with fear, anxiety, and— need—no! I can't let myself succumb to the traitorous bond.

"Leave me," I say, sitting up taller and crossing my arms.

Millie bows, but before she Apparates away, she turns back to me and says, "Mrs. You were happy here—with Master. He loves you. He just wants you safe. He— needs you to be careful for—" It looks as though she's at war with herself as she speaks.

"Get Out!" I snap, feeling betrayal again. Draco has a terrible way of showing he *loves* me!! Lovers don't sacrifice you to madmen or force themselves on you!

A shiver runs over my shoulders as I think about how foolish I was to trust him. I hate that I didn't question more during those first few months and allowed Draco to lull me into a false sense of security. It hurts to think I spent a year under his spell.

Millie disappears, leaving me alone again. Shaking with anger, I spoon more soup into my mouth and grab the remaining slice of bread as I walk to the door. I know it'll be locked, and there's no sense in trying, but I feel compelled to at least check—it's locked. A small part of me hoped I would find it open.

I hang my head and close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. Then, remembering something, I move to the bedside table to pick up my copy of *Hogwarts: A History* before sitting back down to read while I finish my meal.

A few hours later, I step out of the shower and wrap myself in a large towel. Though it's late, I couldn't force myself to fall back asleep after days of rest. That, and I'm on edge, wondering

when Draco will return.

I pick up my silver and ivory comb from the drawer and then run the thick teeth through my wet hair. Water drips behind me onto the towel as I continue plotting my next course of action. I pick up my heavy locks between my hands and dry my hair with wandless magic, making me feel a little better. I'm not entirely useless without my wand.

My curls drape over my shoulders and down my back as I move back to the bedroom, searching for fresh clothes. Though, I stop in my tracks when I open the door.

Draco is sitting on the edge of the chair by the window. His legs are spread wide with his elbows on his knees. His hands are clasped over the back of his neck and his face is towards the ground. When he hears me approach, he lifts his eyes to mine, and we both freeze.

I feel my heart leap to my throat, and my body call to him. He looks delicious with his hair slightly askew and his muscles tense. Goddamnit!! I turn my back to him, fuming over my disloyal thoughts as I enter the closet. I can't have this conversation naked.

As I head to where I keep my nightgowns, I hear him follow. My arms and legs tingle with barely held back energy, but I don't turn to face him.

"Leave me alone."

"Hermione, we need to talk," He says in his deep voice.

My hands grip the drawer's wood and shake as I try to determine his mood from those five words. I want to know what I'm walking into and how to prepare myself.

"Yes, I know. I want to be clothed for that conversation, and I no longer consent to you watching me undress," I say through tight lips. But then I spin around and stare daggers at him, adding, "Though, you've made it clear recently you don't care about my consent."

Draco rolls his lips and shoots me a condescending glare before turning and walking back to the bedroom.

I take my time and choose a pair of jeans and a sweater. They're not pajamas, but the outfit makes me feel more secure. Though, the soft fabric does nothing to calm my appetite.

When I meet him back in the bedroom, Draco is standing at the window, staring out at the grounds as I saw him doing several times while I slept. I want to put as much space between us as possible, so I stand near the door and wait for him to speak first.

"I'm sorry," he says after a long pause.

"Wonderful, Draco," I spit, throwing my plan to remain calm and calculated out the window. "Then we're all set. You're sorry. Wow! I feel so much better."

"Watch it, Hermione."

I throw my hands to my hips and sneer, "Oh, wait, did you assume, I'd run to your arms after you apologized!? You had me tortured and then you raped me!" I'm so mad that my hair begins to spark.

Draco whips around and narrows his eyes at me but doesn't approach. His chest lifts as I watch him restrain himself. He's huge. Draco's size never intimidated me before—I always felt comforted by his stature and strength. Though, now, I'm overcome by how much power he wields over me. He has me outmatched in physicality, not to mention how much information he possesses that I lack.

"Give me my wand!" I demand. "Our marriage is over. I'll take my chances on the streets. I'm leaving you."

"You can try," he says with icy precision.

His words crack in the air with a dangerous threat. It knocks the breath from my lungs. Angry tears well up in my eyes as he stalks towards me.

"Go sit down," he orders. "Don't make me force you to do anything else. I think you've had enough of that for now."

Even though I'm cursing with fury, I can see I'm pushing Draco in a direction that I'd like to avoid. So, I choose my battle and head to the corner to climb onto the windowsill as I did several days ago. There's something about perching with my back to the wall that feels safe in full sight of the room.

Once seated, I cross my arms over my chest and glare at Draco as he runs his hand through his hair.

"I'll tell you more about the wizarding world—" he sighs as my ears perk up. I don't want to admit it, but this statement has me deadly curious.

"—But you will not ask me to tell you anything about your former life." Draco continues with a sharp tone of finality. "You've proven twice recently that you can't handle digging around for memories."

Draco sounds stern but not as scary as I've seen. Even though I know I can't trust him, I want to know more, so I nod in response.

Our eyes meet, causing a shiver to run down my spine. I wonder for a moment if Draco is as needy as me.

"The only thing I'll tell you about your life before is this—I mentioned that you were instrumental in ending the war," he's staring at me now as though this pains him to admit. "You were."

He pauses, and I give Draco a *get on with it* look.

"You gave up critical intel and sacrificed yourself in exchange for your friends' lives," he explains. "—subsequently handing the win to Voldemort— the wizard who tortured you."

It feels like the world stops spinning and time stands still. I wonder if I'll ever breathe again. My arms begin to itch as I feel a wave of desperation wash over me. I'm so sick of feeling this lost. My friends?!

"S-sacrificed myself to who?" I ask, stumbling over my words.

"To the Dark Lord," Draco offers with very little emotion in his voice. "—who gave you to me."

I don't want to believe that I would help end the war for that Monster. It doesn't make sense.

"Prove it!" I say, scowling at Draco.

He summons a stack of newspapers from thin air and drops them unto the sill next to me.

"That's all the *Daily Prophets* since the end of the war. Read them yourself," he states, and I raise a skeptical eyebrow at him. Draco shrugs, "It won't set back your recovery. That was a lie. You can read all you want."

I thumb through the stack and notice pictures and headlines that cause my stomach to turn. I close my eyes and then push the papers aside to focus on the topic at hand. I intend to scour every page, but I need to hear as much from Draco as he's willing to tell me.

"You came to the Dark Lord during the final battle and made the deal. You gave up the intel and were imprisoned while the Dark Lord ended the battle. When he returned to interrogate you further, your memories were gone." Draco pauses for a moment, and some hint of darkness crosses his features. "We don't know what happened."

I hear a ringing in my ears which causes me to shake my head in frustration. "What was the Intel?" I ask, and it sounds like my voice is miles away.

"I don't know," Draco says, shifting his weight and staring at the floor. "Voldemort suspected that you knew more than you admitted, but he had no interest in keeping you himself." He walks to the bar cart to grab a drink and then moves to the window.

"He interrogated you for months before guards dropped you on my doorstep." I feel rage wash up my back as he speaks. Draco's shoulders shift as he admits, "It's my job to look for signs of your memory retuning."

I feel my heart thumping out of my chest. My mouth is dry, and I worry I'm going to be sick.

I ask as my voice shakes, "How long have I been here?"

Draco turns to look at me again. "Six years."

I stare at nothing for a long time as my head continues to buzz. Draco calls my name, but I can't focus on him—on anything really. Finally, I look out the window behind me and notice the soft flickering lights of the lanterns that line the garden paths. They used to twinkle in my estimation but now their eerie shadows dance over the stone.

Six years.

I stand and stumble towards the door as if pulled by some spell.

"Let me out," I croak.

Draco doesn't follow me but turns to watch my movements. He stands, rooted to the spot, not making any effort to heed my demand.

I reach the door and pull at the handle, shocked to find it open. Without giving it any more thought, I run into the hallway, down the steps, taking two at a time, then out the front doors. My feet crunch across the gravel, and I run through the lanterns' shadows on my way to the gate. I'm singularly focused on getting as far from this place as possible.

I run until I'm a foot from the iron bars. Then I screech to a halt. Dread shivers over my arms, and devastation rips through my body. I can't bring myself to grab the handle. I know the gates won't open, and I refuse to feel the confirmation in my palms.

My knees give out, and I fall to the ground. My hands shake as I try to catch my breath. I've been here for six years, and I only remember one. Even then, I'm sure that there are bits I don't recall. Moments and memories torn from me again.

I bring my hand to my cheek and realize fat tears are falling to the ground in front of me.

I hear the footsteps but don't register Draco's approach until he hauls me into his strong arms and presses me to his chest. I know I should fight, but I've lost all my energy, and Draco's hold feels so right.

"Come on, love," Draco hums. "Let's get you back inside where you're comfortable."

Exhaustion penetrates every aspect of my being as I curl into his embrace. Draco's strength is a salve to my weary soul. His scent quiets my racing heart.

"You called me Mudblood," I whine.

"Hermione. I'm sorry," Draco says. I feel his deep voice rumble in his chest and know that he's sincere.

"Why would you call me that?" My voice is small, and my question is filled with pain.

"It's—it was expected of me." He kisses my forehead, and I melt further into his arms as Draco crosses the threshold into our home. "It's how you're known."

He moves up the steps. "I'm Muggle-born?" I ask as I scrunch my eyes in confusion.

" *Fuck!* " He growls.

Draco stomps into our room as I question why I ever tried to learn more—why I ever fought this pull. Everything fell apart when I began to question my surroundings. Millie said it, Draco loves me, and I'm happy here with him.

I push my fear and anger down and grab hold of the bond, singing to life again. This feels good. This is all I want. I lift my head to place a soft kiss on Draco's jaw. I've waited all day to feel my body pressed against his again.

He places me on the bed and pulls my sweater over my head. I feel my skin pebble as the cool air licks my torso.

"Lay back, baby," Draco orders, and I lean into the pillows as he drags his shirt over his head. "Let me help you feel better." He crawls onto the bed and leans over me for a moment before his lips brush mine.

I let out a sigh. Draco's kiss feels like coming home. I needed this to set the world straight. Everything makes sense when we're together.

Draco dips his tongue past my lips, and I taste his passion. I nip at his lower lip in appreciation. Then suddenly, he's rolling me over to straddle his legs. In the blink of an eye, we're naked. I'm dripping with desire after several days of abstinence. The room is dim, and I look down at his gorgeous body, strong and commanding. His large hands hold my hips as I feel Draco's cock rubbing sinful pressure against my clit.

"There you go," he says as my pussy encases him. He's right. This is what I needed. It's what my body demanded from the moment I woke up. I tilt my head back and moan as Draco starts to direct my hips back and forth over his length.

"Look at you," he praises, as my heavy breasts bounce and my body rolls. "My witch is so beautiful." I start to fly—the heat in my lower abdomen blooms, and my skin tingles. I chase the escape. I deserve the escape. This is how I escape.

"Ah, ah," Draco hums, a chill in his tone. His right hand leaves my hip and fists my jaw. His left hand turns to stone, freezing my movements. I take deep breaths as my chest rises and falls, but Draco holds my jaw in a vice-like grip. Then, finally, he sits up until I have to raise my eyes to his and my breasts rub against his chest. "Don't ever run from me again."

My body is on fire, and I shed another tear. I can't tell if it's from Draco's words or my excruciating need to feel a release. Draco shifts us just enough to press into me, sealing his ownership over my body and mind. He flips us over and slams into me.

"Say it!" he demands, smashing into my cervix.

"I'll never run from you again," I mewl. I'll say anything at this point.

We both know it. I'm his.

Chapter End Notes

Trauma and that bond are bitch! Amiright!?

Chapter 6: Gemino

Chapter Summary

"Now my love it spins me 'round
Now my love it's let me down
And how my thoughts they spin me around
Now my thoughts they let me down
And then there's you
Then there's you
And then there's you
And then there's you ... ooo ooo"
-And Then You, Greg Laswell

Chapter Notes

I continue to be floored by the response to this piece. Thank you! I took a bit longer to update this time and I know apologies at the top of chapters get tired but I am sorry. A LOT has been going on and I've needed to slow down a bit. It is my hope to update faster but I also want to make sure that the story is continuing to develop well. Thank you for your understanding! Your comments and kudos always inspire me to keep the story moving!

"Draco?" I ask, tilting my head to catch his expression. The fire is cozy, and I curl on his lap where he's kept me for nearly a week

Whether I'm perched on his legs, caged in his arms, or pinned underneath him, he's done everything possible to keep me near him and the bond happy. The only time I've had to straighten out my thoughts has been when Draco's gone to work — though even that's been few and far between this week. Each time he leaves, he insists that I wear an item of his clothing or something similar to surround me with his presence in his absence.

"Yes?" Draco responds while running his fingers over the soft skin of my wrists. We're sitting in the library, enjoying some quiet time together before he takes me again.

"What do Muggles find so fascinating about televisions?" I ask while lifting one side of my mouth, and concentrating.

Draco's eyebrows rise in shock.

I hurry to explain, "It's just that I see tons of television ads in those magazines you bought me. — I don't get it."

He lets out an incredulous laugh. "Baby, I have no fucking idea why Muggles do anything!"

"Right," I say, shrinking into myself.

I hear the elves working outside the library and the soft tones of the gramophone in the corner.

"Hey, don't do that," Draco coos while lifting my chin. "Don't melt away from me. I didn't mean to belittle you." He places a soft kiss on my lips, and my chest warms. "Muggles are a complete enigma to me. You are the only one I've ever been even slightly interested in."

I scrunch my nose, "I'm not a Muggle."

Draco's delicious scent envelopes me as he gives a sly smile and says, "I know that, witch."

He runs his hand up and down my arm causing me to shiver with need. Draco holds my gaze while pulling me closer to bring the back of his hand against my hardened nipple. Even through my sweater, the feeling is scandalous.

"What would make you feel better, love?" He asks, setting his book down and kissing my neck.

I savor the feel of his lips on my skin before requesting, "Can we get a TV?"

Draco pulls back and balks, "Seriously?"

"I want to see what all the fuss is about," I respond with a shrug.

"Sure, Hermione," Draco says while shaking his head. "Add it to the list."

I smile then he pinches the bridge of his nose, mumbling, "The elves are going to have a blast figuring out the electricity logistics."

It started with the magazines, then the portable CD player to see how Muggles listen to music, and now it's a television. I've been slowly building my collection of non-magic items to reconnect with Hermione the *Mudblood*.

Over the past week, I've tried to learn as much as possible. As Draco promised, he allowed me to read the Daily Prophets once it was clear that I'd "settled again," as he called it. The Monster, *Voldemort*, apparently won a war, sentencing all Muggleborns to slavery. He defeated some kid and now pulls the strings behind all the decisions made in Britain.

When I first read about the boy, I remember feeling shocked that someone my age could lead a revolution. I brushed my fingertips over Harry Potter's name and felt a pang of longing to be as brave.

Some of what I learned was stated explicitly, and the rest I gathered from bits of information Draco shared here and there.

I sat over the past five days, warm in Draco's arms, discovering how Muggleborns, like myself, became property and all the ways that Wizards continue to move against Muggles in Europe. This world is nothing like the one I envisioned.

Draco places his hand on my neck and caresses a spot at my nape. At first, it feels exquisite, but then I realize he's always fingered my skin there. I used to find the move possessive and erotic, but now it gives me shivers for another reason.

He's massaging the spot on my neck that he showed to the shop owner the day I visited Diagon Alley.

My skin crawls, so I sit forward on instinct, feeling his hand drop. The fire pops, and a shadow dances across the walls.

"Hermione—" Draco warns. He doesn't like when I pull away. I ignore him, though, because I'm on a mission.

Sliding to my knees, I fit myself between his legs and stare up through my lashes. The fire continues to crackle as our bond sparks with need. He's shared a lot with me over the past week, but some things haven't come up yet. So even though serotonin from the bond drugs my system, I try digging deeper.

Draco shifts to make room for his lengthening shaft as I glide my hands along the inside of his thighs and feel the soft fabric under my palms.

"What did you show the man in the bookstore to verify my identity?" I ask, wetting my lips.

Draco's legs spread wide as I hear the clink of his belt. "Gods you're beautiful," he moans.

I lean forward to help pull him from his waistband. He's already pulsing and hard. "Tell, me, please. I'll make it worth your while," I barter, hoping for more answers.

Touching him like this makes my core ache with need. I feel the sharp teeth of his zipper against my arm. My body begs to rid us of our clothes.

"Love," he growls while lifting his hips. "It's adorable that you think there's a scenario where I don't end up down your pretty throat, now."

He fists his length and guides my head toward him. I run my tongue around the rim of his cock and ask again, "Tell me, please," while mouthing at his fullness and licking up his precum.

Draco places his thumb on my chin to pull my mouth open wider before slowly pushing past my lips. He holds my gaze as I watch a shudder of pleasure run over his chest.

"My brand."

With those two words, the floor drops out from underneath my knees.

Draco pushes my head down, brushing the back of my throat as he threads a hand under my hair to rub the spot again. I feel his thick fingers slide over the part of my skin that no longer feels like my own. My cheeks hallow as he pulls out a fraction and then rolls his hips, causing my nose to brush the front of his pants.

"When you first moved in, I laced your tea with a sleeping potion," he croons as his heady musk washes over me. Draco takes his time, guiding my movements to drag out his pleasure while he talks. " — and magically branded you." I feel the veins in his shaft pulse under my tongue.

This is too much. I need some air. I need to think straight, but Draco's steady arrogant tone is causing my sex to drip. I start to regret my tactics as he reaches down to unbutton my cardigan and pull my breast out of my tank top.

Draco ghosts his thumb over my nipple, and I feel him twitch in my throat. The sensation sends shockwaves over my lower abdomen.

He continues, and I want to jump up and run away, but my body remains pinned to the ground, sucking him off.

"— every wizard who sees it will instantly know where you belong." He picks up his pace, causing me to gag a bit from his assault on my throat.

Draco grips my head with both hands, slamming into my mouth as my tits bounce. I can feel his pleasure mirrored through the bond while he watches me.

"Even if you disguise your identity, all I need to do is cast a spell and my brand will be visible to anyone helping me find you."

I pinch my eyes shut, hating the man who controls my every emotion — the one who's currently moving sporadically and holding my face to his crotch longer with each push and pull.

His voice lowers, and he leans forward to whisper, "I placed it at the back of your neck so that I can see it while I fuck your mouth. Though I can move it anywhere I want."

He drags his fingers from the spot down to my chest, and a dark black outline of the Malfoy family crest follows. I see the mark for the first time as he pulls me off his cock and a long line of saliva and precum dribbles down my chin.

He lets me stare for a second while running his left hand up and down his length. Then he raises a challenging eyebrow at me and drags the crest over my arm and onto my hand.

The message is clear. Draco can make it very hard for me to hide. At the back of my neck, I could hide his brand under my hair. Though, if he moved it to my arm or worse, my face!

"Satisfied?"

His deep voice rumbles through me. I nod, holding back tears and wishing again that I didn't have such an insatiable curiosity.

"Good. Now come here and finish me off."

Draco sets to work using my mouth to chase his release. I shift my legs, squeezing my thighs together, seeking the delicious friction I deserve when wiping my mind clear— giving in to the bond's directive.

After a few minutes, he takes pity on me and drags me to the floor before vanishing my clothes to rub his rock-hard dick onto my throbbing clit.

I shatter against him moments before he paints me with his seed.

"Look at your sweet pussy glistening with my cum," he hums. Then he drops his entire body weight onto me, spent.

Draco and I take a few deep breaths before he kisses away the tears from the corner of my eyes, saying, "I'm glad I can tell you things now, love."

Three days later, I'm up in *my* room on the third floor.

I've grown an affinity for this space and now see it as somewhat of a personal retreat. Draco seems to respect my privacy here. He tends to leave me alone until I can feel the intense pull of the bond begin to eek from my skin in his absence. Then he's always at the door, ready to renew its potency.

I hear his heavy footfall as I tap my wand on the boombox in front of me. Gameboys, remote control cars, and a desktop computer are strewn about the room. Canned laughter echoes from the television as Draco's broad figure casts a shadow over my shoulder. He's leaning against the doorframe, scowling.

"Have you had enough with this Muggle shit yet?" He asks.

"No," I respond with a dreamy, far-off lilt. The lights flicker above my head, drawing our eyes.

I cross my arms and frown at the stereo, fisting my wand and biting my lower lip in concentration. The wood feels reassuring in my grasp.

Draco gave my wand back several days ago. He placed it on the table during lunch and slid it over to me with a firm note: "*Be good.*"

Having my magic back caused me to sigh with relief.

That day we had a lovely morning. However, adjusting to the drastic shifts between dire circumstances and intense devotion are difficult. When I'm drowning in the waves of the bond's influence, it's easy to forget everything that happened over the past month.

Draco still takes my breath away.

That day we ate breakfast in bed while he read to me. I curled into his side, nibbling on toast with his heavy arm draped over my naked shoulders. He wore his reading glasses, which he only does when feeling one hundred percent at ease. Draco manages to look sexy no matter what he puts on, but the glasses do something special to my insides.

After washing down our meal with a cup of hot tea each, we dressed and went for a long walk through the gardens. Draco held my hand as we crunched over the path. He also watched with kindness in his eyes as I picked up an injured dove on the gravel and brought it to him to heal.

"It's wing is too damaged, love." he whispered.

"No, it's not. You can do it. Please, Draco." I begged as I placed my hand on his forearm.

I hated seeing the frail creature — defenseless and hurt, unable to fly away.

Draco gave me a curious glance as if the stone façade of his recently hardened persona was chipping away. He brushed my hair behind my ear as he spoke.

"Okay, Hermione. I'll try."

He worked on healing the wing as the bird shivered in my palms. Eventually, Draco reached a stopping point and called Millie to come to retrieve the animal, asking her to care for it while it recovered.

As we finished our stroll together, Draco was quieter than usual. We walked for a long time before he said, "Your empathy is truly moving."

In the distance, birds sang a sweet song, low and haunting. The warm air shifted between us, and it looked for a minute as if he wanted to say something else, but then the moment passed.

We walked back to the Manor and washed up for lunch. I checked in with the elves in the kitchen as Draco grabbed something from his office. Then, with a tight expression, he returned my wand while I lifted a spoonful of leek and potato soup to my lips.

A shiver of excitement shot through my spine as I grabbed at the Vinewood. Though Draco caught my movements and trapped my fingers below his large hand.

"Be good," he warned. His eyes were guarded and stern.

All I could do was nod.

I tap the stereo a few more times as I scowl. I've had nearly an hour to myself, and I feel the anger creeping over my shoulders. Draco is such a frustrating figure in my life. He controls my every movement and exploits his power over me, but I still feel an intense longing to be with him and loved by him. I sit up straighter and roll the ache from my shoulders, wondering if I'll ever be free from his pull.

"Who were you talking to downstairs?" I ask. "I heard you yelling."

Draco frowns and draws his arms tighter across his chest. He fists his wand in his hand, and I see the tension in his neck as I lift my eyes to take in his response.

"Voldemort."

A pit of anxiety shifts in my stomach. The hairs on my arms raise, and I start to shake.

"He was here?"

"Briefly," Draco asserts through tight lips.

So that's why I was allowed to spend some time to myself.

"Why?" I whisper. I hate that my voice sounds so scared.

There's a long silence as Draco shifts his weight and stares at the floor. Anger wafts over the bond in palpable waves, so strong I feel as though I could taste it if I tried.

"You're not the only mind he monitors," he eventually growls.

This information is new, and I'm unsure what to make of it. Draco seems livid. He fidgets with his wedding band, and it looks like his skin is crawling.

"Come here," he demands.

As I stand and walk towards the door, I notice the draw of his influence over my chest. He looks tired, and I feel the sudden need to comfort him. He waits for me to meet him as he leans against the door. I swipe my small hands over his temple and down his neck, rubbing away the tension.

"Did he hurt you?"

Draco's eyes close as he leans into my touch. "No, sweetheart." His voice is quiet and filled with a thousand unsaid words.

"What can I do to make you feel better?" I ask, parroting back the phrase he often offers. When I'm this close to him, the bond sings. I'd lay myself on the floor as a willing sacrifice if he wanted me to do that for him.

"Honestly?" He huffs. "I'd love to hear you play for me. Your music always cures my sour moods."

My brows furrow in confusion. Draco almost always wants to expend his pent-up energy through intimate means. His suggestion is also shocking because I have no recollection of ever playing an instrument.

"Play what?" I ask.

Draco takes my hand and leads me to the Manor's ballroom. It's a vast space with gleaming marble floors and towering walls. Off to the side, near a giant hearth, sits a music stand and a case.

"When you first arrived I often caught you staring outside and fingering the air as if playing an invisible instrument." Draco explained. "The movements seemed to calm you. A month or so later I came home from work and you had charmed some items around the house into the most ingenious sight."

We stop several feet from the fireplace as he continues to talk. I'm in shock. I don't remember ever being in this room before, and I'm sick of that experience.

Draco continues, "You'd transfigured yourself a makeshift violin. It was far from perfect but the music you pulled from that instrument took my breath away." He squeezes my hand and kisses my cheek before finishing, "I never saw you play at school. I imagine it's something you picked up during the war to keep your hands and mind busy."

He nods toward the stand, indicating that I should investigate. I'm irritated, but deadly curious. I walk towards the case and crouch to flip the latches.

When the lid opens, I see the most exquisite-looking violin I can imagine. The wood gleams, and the strings shine as if Globin-made. I trace the line of the instrument's sleek neck, then turn to Draco with questioning eyes. I couldn't have transfigured something like this.

Draco gives a knowing smile. "I fell in love with you all over again that day and bought you the finest instrument I could find." He walks toward me and towers over my petite frame as he purrs, "You deserve the very best."

Reaching toward the music on the stand, he opens the book to a page near the middle and then conjures a chair to relax while I play.

I pick up the wooden piece of art and place it under my chin, as I've seen in books. The bow feels solid and proper in my grip, and I know that when I set it to the strings, I'll be able to play.

I glance at the music holding the bow high and notice the title, Barber's, *Adagio*. I take a deep breath and begin to play. Draco sighs as I pull the most haunting and beautiful music from the core of the reverberating instrument.

Nothing should surprise me anymore.

The music seems to slice through the air and echo around the hall, calling out all of the complex emotions I've felt over the past several days, months, years even. It speaks to my soul, and though I'm the musician, I find myself tearing up at the sheer expression of everything I've been holding inside.

Playing makes me feel free. My fingers pull forward notes that sail through the space, out into the gardens, and over the Manor gates.

Draco sits in silence, listening to me play and watching the passion in my movements. He smiles, and everything feels right again as if this time and place are made for us to experience together. I play for hours until my fingers ache from use, and I've exhausted all the music. Then I play more from memories locked away yet not forgotten.

Eventually, I pack up as Draco stretches and yawns. Night fell, and it's time to get to bed. He stands behind me as I close the music on the stand, brushing my hair over my shoulder and

kissing my neck.

"Thank you."

I turn to face him and place a hand on his jaw.

"No, thank you Draco. That was wonderful."

"Let's go to bed, love."

Remembering myself, I pull back and cast my eyes to the ground. Draco catches my shift in expression and lifts my chin to face him again.

"What is it?"

"Can I please spend a bit more time upstairs?" I plead. "I need a moment to myself. Remembering this gift was — " I take a deep breath and let out a long sigh. "—very meaningful. Can have a few more minutes to myself?"

Draco's eyes narrow, and I assume he's about to deny me. He searches my expression, then sighs.

"A *few* more minutes."

I smile, trying to temper my emotions, then make my way back to the third floor.

Nothing makes sense anymore. I reflect as I plop down on the bed and stare at my wand. The Muggle appliances litter the space. I smirk at the long black extension cord running out the window.

I'm drawn to a sexy, kind, loving, and generous man. However, he's also ruthless, manipulative, and violent. Sometimes I feel like his behaviors are an act, but understanding which side of him is the true Draco and which isn't real hurts my head. It's all too confusing.

All I know is that I need more answers. I have to find a way to learn more about who I was and begin to piece together my past. Unfortunately, Draco refuses to enlighten me about my locked memories or tell me much about my former self. He tries to appease me by explaining more about the Wizarding world under Voldemort's rule, but I need to know more of the story.

I'm desperate to find out why I made a deal with the Devil and landed myself in this situation. I can't understand what could've caused me to take such an action.

I flick my wand, turning on the television in my frustrated wondering. Learning of my musical talents tonight only intensified my need to know more about myself. Not to mention I experienced another whisp of memory last night. This time it was of a face — a boy with bright red hair — tall and lean with a long nose.

I have to find out more about my past.

I sit up and crack my neck from side to side, then wave my wand again as all the electronics in the room chirp and flicker.

"Hermione?" I hear Draco call. He's worried and beginning to get angry. "That's enough time. Come to bed."

He's marching up the steps to come to retrieve me.

"Gemino!" I mutter and watch as all of the electronics begin to multiply. The room is now full of blinking lights and a cacophony of noises. The lights start to flicker and pop under the strain of the Muggle electricity,

"Hermione!" He yells, but my plan is already in motion.

The day I awoke after Voldemort attacked my mind and Draco raped me, I developed a plan. Draco made a mistake. He underestimated me. I surprised myself even because the answer was so simple and right in front of me.

Since that night, the gates have been locked. The wards have kept me from truly being able to escape. I needed to find a way out.

I roll up my sleeves and ready myself as I remember reading over the words again in *Hogwarts, a History*. Magic and electricity don't mix!

"Gemino! Gemino, *Gemino!*" I cast several spells at once. The sconces flare, and then the Manor goes dark. I smile, knowing it worked.

Draco's furious figure slams into the room just as I twist and Apparate away.

Chapter 7: Lost

Chapter Summary

"Give me time here
In the silence
And freeze, freeze, bitter sky

You won't find me
You won't find me"

-You Won't Find Me, Narrow Skies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

My anxiety spikes through the roof as soon as my feet touch the ground.

What the hell am I doing!?

I've been obsessing about another escape for the past week, but now I'm overcome with dread. Things didn't go so well the last time I left the Manor.

However, this time I have more information.

First off, I'm wiser about the actual world in which I live. Second, I know I need to avoid places where people congregate if I don't want to be trapped and sent back to Draco. Which I don't, I tell myself, even though my shoulders still itch with the need to be wrapped in his arms.

Plus, I have a better understanding of how our bond works. I've been paying attention.

I close my eyes and focus on the spot below my rib cage where I sense Draco's pull the strongest. My nerves flutter, and my pulse quickens, but I don't feel him approaching. All I notice is cold fury pouring through the bond in shards of dangerous energy. However, along with the heat and haze of his ire, I also feel his anxiety. He's worried, but it feels as though he's grounded — or at least he hasn't left the Manor yet.

Whenever Draco went to work last week, I'd wrap myself in whatever shirt or sweater he designated for me. Then I would breathe in his clean scent and focus on his location. His fragrance, as always, was warm and comforting with a tinge of something that smelled expensive. I don't know how to describe it, but even his scent is authoritative.

In my mind, the tendrils of magic floated from my core, out of my being, and headed in search of Draco's corresponding pull. I could feel where he was located in a general sense — east. But I couldn't pinpoint his exact location. It was more like a vague awareness than an accurate indicator.

Although, when Draco was home, things were different. I could shut my eyes and picture in vivid detail which room he was in and almost what he was doing.

My theory is that the bond is highly dependent on proximity. Though a shiver runs up my spine as I realize I've not done enough diagnostic testing to develop solid conclusions.

I have to keep moving forward.

With that reminder, I shake my hands to release the tingling sensation that compels me to turn on the spot and vanish right back home to Draco's arms. A conflicting tension strains and pulses across my magical core as if Draco and I are both magnets, typically drawn to one another and hard to separate. But now I've flipped myself over. I feel the strange result of our competing forces creating a visceral wave. He's trying to draw me back, and I'm doing my best to repel that call.

My foot shifts, and dirt scraps between slick rock, leaves, and the soles of my trainers. I right myself while taking in my surroundings and try my best not to let the new terrain frighten me.

Above me, there's a thick canopy of trees blocking any stars. The vast blue underbrush of the forest spreads out in front of me, and I'm unable to discern through the darkness and mist if I'm at the forest's edge or deep within its heart.

The air here smells fresh and wet. I twist to see if there's any whisper of light to guide me but realize I'll only have my wand to lean on for support. Letting out a sigh, I brush my hair out of my eyes and admit that It's better that way. I wanted someplace remote.

Picking a place to flee to was tricky. I have no memory of anywhere outside the Manor except for Diagon Alley. Well, and whatever home Draco brought me to the night I met Voldemort.

The memory of that horrible experience causes me to shiver with rage.

I assume that I made it to Diagon Alley because— though I didn't remember— I'd been there several times. Also, I read about the magical village and saw plenty of pictures.

Several days last week, I snuggled into Draco's chest, worrying that there wouldn't be a place that provided the perfect alignment of criteria for my next escape attempt.

Draco always held me while running his fingers over my wrists or rubbing my neck. His heavy hands reminded me of the power he wielded over me. I thought about how Hogwarts was well known to me due to what I've learned from my favorite book and my experience before the accident, but it's still a school. A school run by this evil regime.

And even though the anti-apparition wards came down in the final battle, never to be replaced, It didn't seem like the best option—too public.

Then finally, I figured out a solution while reading an article about my part in the final battle. Or, should I say, "the Mudblood's" role? That's how the paper always refers to me.

One edition of the *Daily Prophet*, in particular, offered a piece with a large photo of the forest clearing where everything supposedly came to a head. Unfortunately, the paper gave few details other than Voldemort lured me to the trees and then vanquished his foes. Though, as I read it, I knew I'd finally come up with an option.

Three days ago, I continued to plot while doing my best not to draw attention to myself.

"I thought the final battle happened at Hogwarts," I said to Draco before taking a sip of tea and casually glancing at him out of the side of my cup.

We read together in our chair by the window before heading to bed. Draco wore sleep trunks and no shirt, which caused me to squirm with anticipation in my skimpy tank top and shorts.

"You know it did, love." Draco sounded confused by my comment seeing as though I was holding the *Prophet* that outlined the entire ordeal.

"But this talks of a forest clearing," I say while pointing at the parchment. "The only forest near Hogwarts is forbidden due to all of the dangerous creatures."

Understanding smoothed the lines around Draco's curious eyes as he said, "Well, nearly all those creatures were fighting for the Dark Lord so there wasn't much to worry about."

He shifted my weight on his knee and pulled my strap up my shoulder. It had fallen, and he knew I was cold, but the move also intensified my body's hunger for him.

I smiled at his care and then huffed, "Why did the Hogwarts leadership allow those dangerous beings to live so close to young children in the first place?" I asked to continue digging for the information I needed.

"I don't know, but it worked out for the Dark Lord." Draco sighed. "All he had to do was promise them more rights than they currently had and they all joined his cause." His eyebrows furrowed as he spoke.

I shifted to face him better, asking, "Did he free them? I haven't read of any Muggle disturbances."

Draco's mouth tightened to a thin line. "No. The opposite, in fact. He permanently imprisoned them inside the forest after the battle. The place is even more forbidden now that it's full of violent, betrayed werewolves and hags." He gave a hollow laugh, then added, "Wizards can get in, but they'd be mad to go near it these days."

I guess I'm mad.

Even after deciding on my location, I continued to ask simple questions about various places mentioned in my reading. I didn't want to leave any trail for Draco to look back on and follow.

I start walking over rough earth, pushing young branches out of my way in search of the clearing I read about. While I move, I'm on high alert. My ears feel attuned to every squeak of an animal or whoosh of air over tumbling leaves because I really don't want to run into an angry vampire. Of course, that would be just my luck.

I fist my wand, and again damn the gods for leaving me at the mercy of my limited mind. Traipsing through this forest is insane. This escape would be so much easier with access to all my memories. My only solace is that magic still moves within me like muscle memory. I'm still a badass witch — just a bit disoriented.

I walk for what feels like an hour, all while keeping a close pulse on Draco through the bond. He still hasn't moved, which is curious, but I'm confident he's plotting a way to retrieve me.

If I could erase everything that's happened recently — all the information I gained and everything I've endured — then maybe I'd be happy going back to the Manor to live in ignorant comfort.

Unfortunately, that's not possible.

I know too much now, and I'll be damned if I'll let Draco wipe my mind again.

I'm not sure if it's thoughts of Draco or something else, but suddenly I feel like I'm being watched as I bumble through the foliage.

A shutter of anxiety runs up my spine, but then something glittery catches my eye, and I move to investigate. It's draped over low tree branches, floating in the breeze and reflecting the little light available from above.

I pick up the strand, running it through my fingers to feel its silky texture. Unicorn hair. I recognize it from its description in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Curious, I stand still longer than planned to examine the treasure and get lost, thinking about its many magical properties. It's fascinating.

While I'm distracted, the air shifts and chills. Next, a twig cracks to my left, shocking me back to the situation at hand. I hear a hiss and take off running, breathing heavily as I squint and raise my hands in front of my face to keep me from scratching an eye out on a branch.

My feet slam against the ground, pushing off as hard as possible to put distance between myself and the noise.

Fuck, bugger, fuck! This was a bad idea! I'm going to get eaten out here.

As I sprint away, I try not to let myself mentally beg for Draco because I know he'd help me ward off danger. Damn it!

Up ahead, I see a break in the trees where there's a grove of Fir and Spruce trunks outlining — a clearing! I found it! I dive through the bushes and land on the mossy ground that makes up the tree-covered meadow.

As soon as I leave the brush, I whip around, stumbling over roots, and start throwing up wards.

"Salvio Hexia!" I yell. "Protego Maxima! Fianto Duri!"

When convinced that I've sufficiently protected myself, I sit then lean against a thick, knotted tree trunk and clutch my side, panting.

I'm coming down from my fright and noticing Draco's nerves coursing with anxiety. It's like his magical core is clawing at my insides. He felt my fear and now wants me back more than ever.

I force myself to take a long breath, soothing my heart rate. I don't want to give Draco any advantage on how to find me.

As I breathe, I scan my surroundings. The earth here feels wise, as if it's seen important moments in history and recorded those details in its soil.

I flatten out my hand and hover it just above the fuzzy tops of the moss. If I close my eyes, I can feel the pulsing hum of magic.

What happened here?

My curiosity feels like a heavy weight on my chest. So this is where it happened— where *I* ended the war for Voldemort. It doesn't make sense.

Shaking myself from my thoughts, I cast a Tempest, then groan. It's three in the morning. I'm dead curious about this destination, but with the stress, I'm exhausted. So I decide to investigate tomorrow when I've had a chance to rest. Hopefully, there'll be more light as well.

I conjure a blanket, flop down on the ground and pull the cover under my chin. Even though I'm still terrified, I know I need to get some sleep to remain alert. So, I take a few more deep breaths, close my eyes and try to block out any more chirping bugs or snapping twigs that threaten to startle me back into flight mode. The wards I set will hold. I just need to rest for a little bit.

"Hey love, wake up."

I crack one eye open and then throw my arm over my face. We're in a small, familiar home. I blink and see the rolling hills outside our window.

"Noooo," I whine. I wanted more time to rest.

The smell of floral tea, savory buttered toast, and sliced tomatoes envelopes me causing my stomach to growl.

Beside me, I hear Draco chuckle. It's a deep sound from his chest, and I love it. He needs to laugh more. Sometimes he can be so serious.

"You don't need to do much other than sit up," he offers while guiding me to the headboard. "—But, Millie always drilled into me the importance of proper mealtimes and all that. Come on, get up."

He places a tray on my lap as I shift to lean against the bed, yawning. I'm up, but only just.

Draco bends down to kiss the top of my head, adding with a sly smile, "Did you sleep well?"

He's insufferable sometimes.

"You know I did," I say over the top of my teacup as I blow on the hot liquid for a second before yawning again. "Did *you* ?"

My pointed stare elicits a toothy grin. Draco slides into bed next to me, stretches his arms, and then places them behind his head.

"As a matter of fact, I didn't get much sleep."

He's leaning against the headboard as well, so I watch him out of the side of my eye and pick up the toast to munch.

"I always wake up starving when you do this to me," I grouch. Though, I'm not really mad.

Draco's sexual appetite is ferocious, and a couple of months ago, I was too tired to keep up. That night I kissed his lips and begged, "Could we wait until tomorrow? I'm knackered. We've already made love twice today."

I remember something dark and sultry passing over his expression.

When he didn't respond quick enough, I teased, "I mean, unless you don't mind that I'm passed out."

As soon as I said it, the air felt thick. I noticed Draco's arousal begin to pull the cords of our bond tighter. Then, there was another pregnant pause where time seemed to stand still from Draco's heated gaze.

He deepened the kiss, saying into my lips, "I mean, I'm willing to try it if your are." His voice dripped with sex and promises.

That night I couldn't remember ever being as turned on. I nodded my approval, and then Draco fetched a sleeping draught. I remember my knickers soaking with the thought of what might happen as he tilted my head back to dip the minty liquid down my throat.

I fell asleep with my core dripping with desire and had the most delicious dreams, cumming in my sleep while Draco fondled and fucked me until dawn.

The following day my muscles ached from use, but I was ready for more, thinking about how scandalous the previous night had been.

Then, a few weeks later, I awoke with a groggy head as though I'd been drugged. My sex felt well used, and my panties were a drenched mess.

"Did you do it again?" I asked that morning, noticing how sensitive my nipples were.

Draco gave an arrogant smile while palming his hardening cock and pulling me closer by the back of my neck.

"It's even better if you don't know what's coming, sweetheart," he winked.

I couldn't argue. Knowing Draco might ravish me any night felt like our dirty little secret. Yet, each time it happened, I awoke with the grateful and sinful awareness that my marriage was amazing.

I yawn once more, then put down my breakfast and move the tray. I shift to stare at my built, commanding husband. His expression turns deliciously arrogant as he catches the shift in my mood. An understanding passes between us without the need for words. A moment later, he tilts his head back, silently directing me to *go on*, as I slide my fingers into my panties.

"Excuse me, Ms. Granger, wake up. Wake up!"

Jolting awake, I cringe and pull in a tight breath as pain shoots into my back. I fell asleep on the meadow floor, leaning against the gnarled tree.

I assess my condition, experiencing simultaneous and conflicting emotions. I'm disgusted by my dream of how Draco used to take me in my sleep. But I'm also coursing with desire. I can't believe he had me convinced that I enjoyed that behavior. Because I definitely didn't! I lie to myself. Shifting my weight causes me to groan at the slick pool of arousal between my legs. My body begs for Draco's expert hands.

A moment later, I realize that someone towers over me. I squint into the darkness at his naked torso, then drag my eyes lower to take in—hooves?

Wiping the sleep from my eyes, I stare at the centaur above me. At the same time, the dream still tingles at the edge of my consciousness, and my core throbs. Somewhere deep in my body, I feel Draco's arrogant chuckle.

A spike of anxiety shoots down my spine as I take in the sight above me. The man doesn't look angry, but I've read that centaurs don't like to interact with humans if they can avoid it.

Then I realize something.

"How did you get through my wards?" I ask, running my hands through my hair while darting my eyes back and forth and scrambling to stand.

His voice is smooth and steady as he responds, "We have seen your return written in the stars for some time now, Ms. Granger."

Granger?

"It is good to see you again," he finishes.

There is so much packed into those two sentences. My hands start to shake as I try out what must've been my maiden name.

"I'm Hermione Granger." My voice is no more than a whisper.

The words feel foreign. They cause the pit of frustration in my chest to deepen. How can I feel no link to my former self but drip with need and want for the fabricated reality I'm currently living in?

I wipe a tear from my eye with the back of my hand, vaguely registering Draco's curiosity bloom to life.

"Who are you?" I ask, but then hasten to add, "I'm sorry, I don't remember my life before I ended up with—" his name cracks and dies in my throat.

Talking about Draco feels too complicated. I'm terrified of him and what he represents, yet I long to be with him simultaneously. He has such a capacity for kindness. Plus, I'm soaking wet with sticky want. Being away may be unbearable if he's already haunting my dreams.

"My name is Firenze." He bows his head as he says this—his Scottish accent thick. "Despite being loyal to my herd, I helped Albus Dumbledore in his quest for goodness. —though, I admit I was never in favor of his use of you children."

None of what Firenze says makes sense to me. I try very hard to catch everything but find myself lost with mentions of wizards I've never heard of and schemes that must've occurred during the war.

I shake my head and rub more sleep from my eyes, trying to wake up quicker. This centaur knows things. He might be able to help me piece together parts of my former self.

"Wait, what?" I ask with a shaky voice. "Who's Dumbledore? And what children?"

"You are as lost as you and the boy foretold in this clearing many years ago. You always were right and smart."

He talks in riddles, and I furrow my eyebrows, trying to make sense of the patterns.

"— who foretold?" I ask again but then throw my hand to my rib as I'm suddenly aware of Draco's shift in location.

Holding a finger up to the centaur, I feel Draco's presence more acutely, so I close my eyes to check in. I picture him storming through the gates of the school grounds. Fuck, I need to move fast. I don't have time to hear much more, and the realization causes me to cry out in frustration.

"I don't have much time! Please, can you tell me anything about what happened to me? — anything that might help me regain my memories?" I beg.

"There's no need to rush from Ptolemy's discovery. We have time." He soothes.

I shut my eyes again and see Draco stomping towards a man who must have been from the castle. They scowl at one another as they chat.

"No, you don't understand! I need to go now!" I plead, throwing my head over my shoulder to check the forest behind me. I'm not sure if he can Apparate to my location or not.

"Ms. Granger. I only need to relay one message. You set it upon me yourself in these woods, many years ago." Firenze continues his confusing narrative.

"Okay, what message?" I demand. I have no idea where I can go to escape capture, but I know it's only a matter of time before I feel Draco's vice-like grip around my wrist. I feel his anger shooting over my shoulders as I say, "Please, hurry!"

The centaur holds out a small black rock chiseled and worn over the years and leans down to place it in my palm.

"It is a portkey," he states. "It was charged with this task many rotations ago."

I stare at it and feel relieved for the ability to flee but nervous about where it will send me. What if this is a trap? Or worse, what if this centaur is crazy and the damn thing is just a rock?!

"Your memories hold the key to melting the stone." He states, and I start to hate this nag for his confusing words. Then he finishes by saying, "You are very close."

In a rush of realization, I feel Draco turn on the spot and head to the clearing. He appears outside the wards as a jolt of fear and longing pierces my core, and I take in his tortured expression. He's furious, devastated, and nervous.

"Hermione—"

His cautious voice is muffled by the ward.

He holds out a hand to me, saying, "Come here, love and I won't be mad. You're not safe without me."

Without thinking, I shift my foot to step in his direction. It's as if even my body is under his spell. He looks kind and concerned, but I feel his anger boiling below the surface.

I can't go back now. I won't. The wards only need to hold a second longer.

If this centaur is right and I'm close to figuring out the key to my memories, I need to keep running.

"Thank you," I spit as I use my wand to tap the stone and watch it begin to shine. A shock of fear spreads across Draco's face as he lunges forward and yells my name.

But I'm gone. I spin and float through the air as if untouched by space and time, and the sensation is all at once exhilarating and nauseating.

When I land, I'm in a cavern. There's several tree roots poking out from the dirt ceiling above. I see a makeshift fireplace with a kettle and smoldering coals.

My eyes take a moment to adjust, which causes me to overlook the man standing in the corner, pointing his wand at my chest.

"What the hell?" he howls.

The sound startles me, so I twist and take in his shabby form.

"Hermione?"

Chapter End Notes

Friends, admittedly, my mind is scrambled with several possible directions for this piece. Share what you hope happens to these two and, while I don't promise to choose any particular direction, your thoughts will probably help offer the inspiration I need. =)

Chapter 8: Hello, love

Chapter Summary

"Cause deep down I'm more than just miss you
The truth is I'm more-oh-oh than just care
Deep down I'm more than just need you
Truth is I'm more-oh-oh than just scared
'Cause you're still alive in my head"
-More, Billy Lockett

Chapter Notes

Happy reading!

"Hey," I say while offering a shallow wave to Remus. He just ducked back into our underground hideout where I've been sequestered.

As I lift my hand, I catch a glimpse of the black, ornate letter 'M' flanked by two dragons atop a shield—Draco's brand. The sight causes me to squeeze my fingers into a fist and slam them into my pocket in frustration. It took him one week to move his claim somewhere more visible.

I growl, feeling the smooth stone in my jeans pocket and thinking about how I've been here for four months and still don't know much about my former self. So, all I've done is trade one prison for another, and I'm just as lost.

Thinking back to the night I arrived, I wonder how the older man and I navigated all the confusion without hexing one another.

That night I dropped into the damp cave, still clutching the portkey. My chest pounded as I attempted to escape Draco and find answers.

When I turned around, shoulders shaking with nervous energy, I found myself at the end of a wizard's wand.

"Hermione?" The stranger asked in disbelief, leaving his weapon held high. "Thank the gods, finally."

My nerves were shot. Too much had gone down over the past twenty-four hours. I did not want to deal with a new threat, so I spat, "Who the hell are you?" while throwing my wand up to match his.

"What are you on about?" he asked, fisting his wand a little harder in concern. Then something crossed over his features— a realization of sorts. Suddenly, he stood taller and looked less friendly, more suspicious. "Wait," he demanded. "How did you get the scar on your right side?"

His words confused me at first, but then I thought of all the times I'd seen myself in a mirror. I could never explain the angry scar down the side of my torso. I always assumed that I received it in the war.

"How the hell should I know!?" I yelled, raising my left arm to the heavens in anger.

I watched the man shift his weight, becoming even more confused. I wanted to curse the centaur that sent me to this new challenge. But instead, I took a moment to check in with the bond to verify whether or not Draco was following me. Because if he was close behind, I needed to move the conversation forward.

I sensed that Draco was nearby, but something odd was blocking my ability to determine his location. I could no longer tell if he was East or West, above me or below me. Instead, all I felt was his muted fury, like he was storming back and forth somewhere, waiting to rip down the barrier placed between us.

The tension between Remus and me dissipated when he saw the sincerity of my frustrations. Cautious then, he introduced himself as my former professor and colleague in war. He seemed to know me well, so I begged him to tell me about my former self, but he only got a few words in before I clutched my head to ward off the knife-like headache.

I cried out, asking him to stop, and we've spent the past several months hiding in something called *Order Headquarters*.

It's a big name for something that's more like a dumpy wet cavern.

Remus insists that the wards will no longer protect me if I go outside. It sounds similar to something my dear husband might say, but I try to trust my new companion.

I spend my days in utter boredom. There are few books or games to keep my mind busy, so I spend my time obsessing about each shift in Draco's mood. As the days inch by, my worry that he'll slam through the cave door and grab me increases.

"How are you today?" Remus asks as he pulls a small satchel from his back pocket and places it on a table to his right. His eyes are tired. He always looks exhausted, especially when he's gone for the evening, which happens about once a month.

"Fine," I mutter

He strides over, placing a bowl of blackberries in front of me with a wan smile. This place doesn't have much food. We survive on fish, greens, nuts, mushrooms, and the occasional egg.

I'm not complaining. Remus is fatherly and able to engage in academic conversations that keep me entertained for a time. He sees my nervousness, though.

Berries are my favorite. He's trying to lighten my mood.

"I thought we could try again," he states, and I stand to grab a fork. I want to smash the berries into a jam for the bread I attempted from grinding acorns into flour. Plus, I'm avoiding his probing.

We've attempted to find my memories several times and have always experienced disastrous results. I'm too frustrated to try again.

"Were you out all night foraging?" I ask to change the subject. "I'm sure you're tired. Why don't you get some sleep?"

There are several camp beds in the small hideout, and Remus set up a corner for me when I arrived. He hung a blanket to give me privacy and fashioned something similar for himself. It's a far cry from the palatial accommodations at the Manor, but it's homey enough. Plus, it's helpful to have some distance from my older roommate when I'm dripping with the need caused by being away from Draco.

At the end of my first week here, I was such a mess with desire that I closed myself behind my curtains in agony. I stayed on my side of the cavern and tried my best not to move my legs. It was torture, feeling my sticky wetness squeezed between my thighs.

Worst of all, it seemed at times like I caught Remus scowling as he sniffed the air. Then one day, he came home, mumbling something about, *This might help*, and dropped a potion bottle into my hand.

Turning it over, I read the label—*Heat Suppressant*—and tried to ignore the warmth in my cheeks as I took a sip, finally experiencing relief. Once we figured out the potion helped, the living situation became less awkward. From what I heard about marriage bonds, they're intense but a different experience from werewolf heats. However, the principle of the potion must work the same.

The magical liquid dulls the effects of my arousal but doesn't negate them. For instance, just last night, I had a dream about a day with Draco before I caught on to his lies, and it caused me to ache with need.

It was more like a memory, a sweet moment between us, one afternoon before I knew any better.

On that day, Draco found me in the garden with the house-elves. I was chatting away with Millie having a grand time and covered with dirt up to my elbows, but he strode over, commanding the attention of everyone and causing all the elves to pause.

I noticed that he dripped with confidence and self-satisfaction as I used the back of my arm to brush my hair out of my face.

"What is it?" I breathed, always happy to have him close.

"Come," was all he said. His low voice purred as he reached to brush my hair off my shoulders and rub his thumb along my neck. I felt the sweet tension coiling between us and stood.

I never questioned his apparent authority over me. On the contrary, I loved the comfort I gained from his control. Now thinking back, I cringe at my foolishness.

Draco used his wand to clean the dirt off me, then placed a hand on my lower back and walked me into our home.

"They finally matured." He stated.

Scrunching my nose and peering at him from under his arm, I said, "Well, that's not cryptic or anything."

He pinched my side in a playful response. "I've been working on something for you. They've taken a long time to secure and grow but they're finally ready."

We entered our potion lab, and Draco brought me to a line of glass phials filled with a green liquid.

"Stewed Mandrakes?" I read.

"They're the main component in Mandrake Restorative Draught. It's a complex healing potion that I thought we could brew together."

His smile was flirty, causing my heart to swell. But I loved it best when he let down his carefully constructed exterior and allowed me to envision Draco, the student. He enjoyed stretching his magical abilities as much as I did.

"Here, check out the instructions—" he stated, handing me a copy of *Advanced Potion Making*.

I scanned the steps in fascination, then huffed, "This is incredibly difficult!"

"I know, but you're incredibly smart," he said, kissing my forehead. His eyes held nothing but adoration in their depths.

Sometimes I worried that I wouldn't be able to perform to my former standards, but Draco's trust gave me confidence.

"We'll, let's get to it then!" I said.

We spent the rest of the day working on the first two parts of the long list of instructions. Draco held a lightness in his step, an eagerness I rarely saw. We chatted about my morning, and he described the many helpful uses of the potion. It was an ordinary day—another beautiful day in a long line that made me madly in love with him.

When the potion crafting came to a natural stop, Draco lifted me to the counter and threaded his large hand into my curls, pulling me towards him and placing his lips to mine. He kissed me with a passion I'd not experienced from him before, nipping at me and tasting my hurried response.

"We're getting there, love," he whispered into my lips in a way that seemed as if he was talking to someone else—the former me perhaps—and it made me burn with a desire to be that woman.

I wanted to be the version of myself he fell in love with more than anything. Draco slid his hands up my thighs and under my skirt. He held firm to the sensitive joint of my hip bone. Then he brushed his thumb beneath the elastic of my panties and unto my core. I shattered against him, pressed between his hard chest and the clinking potion bottles.

When I awoke in the hideout, it wasn't the mind-shattering orgasm Draco gifted me that had me aching to be back at home underneath his weight. It was the entire day—the fact that I lived and loved a man who cared for me, protected me, engaged my mind, and controlled my body. I pulled the blanket firm across my makeshift door and slid my hands into my knickers seeking relief from the memory of my deep and searing love.

Gods, I wish *that* Draco were real—that I hadn't experienced the brutal reality of awakening to the fact that it was all a fabricated lie.

"Hermione," Remus brings me back to the moment while I rummage in a drawer for the utensil I need. "We have to try again at some point. We have to get you some answers and—and I need to know what happened as well."

The last bit he offers while lowering his head in shame.

"Remus, there's no point. We've tried several times to remember my life before and every time it leads to excruciating pain. I'm safe now," I reason, "—and I'm afraid of passing out here! We don't have the correct potions and access to healers."

I lean against the counter with the fork curled into my fist. I know I'm being stubborn—I've done a complete about-face from my previous insistence to learn more—but I'm terrified of being knocked out here for days at a time, defenseless.

"I had a thought," he begins, and I let out a deep sigh of frustration. "—a theory!" he tries, and damn if that angle doesn't speak to my curious mind. I hold my breath, listening for what he might say next. "You have trouble envisioning your old life, right?"

"Yes," I grump.

"However, you don't seem to have trouble gaining new information. You learn new things all the time." He sits up straighter, looking a bit more energetic. It's a departure from his usual steady, stoic nature. "Just this week, for example, you learned how to cast a Patronus."

He's right. I learn new skills or facts easily.

"Yes, but that's different. I've never had trouble learning new *skills*." I say.

Remus places his open palm on the table in front of him and reaches out to me, entreating, "But, that's just it! It wasn't a new skill. You've been able to cast a Patronus since your fifth year at Hogwarts. I knew it was going to be an otter before you conjured it to bounce around this cave. You've never had trouble with your magical abilities and you learned all of that before the war."

I shift my weight. "Where's this headed?" I ask.

"I think your trouble is when you try to envision your former self — when you work to recall those old memories to the forefront of your mind. What if I just—" Remus pauses, "—told you a story?" I stare at him in confusion, waiting for him to continue. "A story about a young woman I used to know."

Excitement bubbles within me. I flop down at the table, forgetting the jam, and prepare to test the theory. The idea has merit. I don't seem to have trouble hearing some facts about before. However, it gets dicey for me when I try to picture the events and pull the memories forward.

"Okay, this friend of yours," I hedge, playing along. "Why did she give Voldemort information? What did she tell him? How could she do that and end the war for that monster?" I ask all the most critical questions that have been burning a hole in my curiosity for months now.

"I don't know. I was fighting in the castle when *my friend* did all that." He says, and my heart sinks. But Remus continues when he can see how his admission disappoints me. "She did all that while my wife —" he chokes up at the mention of this. It's the first time he's told me about her, and I can see the grief on his features. He doesn't have to tell me what happened to her. "We were trying to protect the school from Voldemort's forces."

Remus clears his throat. "So, what is the last thing you remember?" He asks. I haven't told him about my time with Draco. I have a hard enough time trying to sort out my feelings regarding my husband. I don't want to hear any more about his evil ways.

"All I remember is waking up at a Manor," I mumble. Then, changing the subject, I sigh, "So what *can* you tell me about your friend?"

We talk for hours. Remus tells a kind story about a studious and brave girl who befriended Harry Potter and attempted to take down Voldemort. His theory works. Pretending I'm listening to someone else's life story does the trick. I'm able to take in far more information than I had before. I just have to be careful not to picture the memories or attempt to find them in my mind.

In the end, I learn that Hermione Granger was a member of the Order of the Pheonix, a resistance movement. She spent a year on the run with Harry and their friend Ron Weasley, and after she ended the war for Voldemort, Harry and several other Order members were captured and never seen again.

"Nymphadora was one of them," Remus admits with a shaky voice. "In fact, I'm the only one left. I never found their bodies though so I have hope."

All the air presses from my lungs as I hear the worst of it. "Remus, I'm—I'm so sorry. I don't know why I—" My voice cracks, and tears run down my face.

"Don't Hermione. My *friend* never would have turned us in. She *never* would have flipped sides." His confidence releases some of the tension from my shoulders. I take a deep breath as he bolsters himself to say, "I know you don't want to talk about it. I can't imagine what kind of horrors you've been subjected to since the war, but, were there any other captives held at Malfoy Manor?"

The hope in his eyes is crushing. He wants me to tell him that I saw his wife alive. I should've known he would recognize the family crest on my hand.

I recoil at the realization that he thinks I've been a prisoner for the past six years. Yes, that's one way to look at it, but I also lived well—in luxury even. His question makes my skin crawl with unease. There's no way I can tell him I've spent my time since the war cooking with house-elves and happily fucking my supposed husband.

"No," I croak, then stand to stretch. It's been a long day of discovery, and I need to rest. I make my way to my cot, avoiding Remus's eyes. He wants to pry more, but he holds back.

Before I close my curtain, Remus asks, "Mione— do you know where Voldemort is living? Do you—? Do you have any idea where he might be keeping them?" He sounds devastated, as though I've confirmed his worst nightmare.

They're dead. We both know it, but I don't have the heart to force him to admit that fact.

"No. The only place I ever visited was some gothic estate. I never saw where it was located. All I know was that it was some sort of residence. Maybe, in Kent? I don't know." I take a deep breath. "I saw hills out the windows—maybe Bristol?"

I'm unsure what I saw, but I'm too tired to discuss it further. So instead, I curl into bed and wrap myself in the scratchy covers, falling asleep to the sound of the older man rummaging

around the hideout in his grief.

When I wake in the morning, Remus is gone. He often forages for food, so I don't think much of it until he doesn't return that evening.

The following day he still isn't back.

My anxiety begins to crawl up my arms, and I find myself restless with worry. Remus didn't leave a note, and I'm left to assume that he took off in his grief to check the large wizarding estates near the counties I mentioned.

I have trouble falling asleep that night. The cavern seems empty without him. The berries are gone, and the only food I've had to eat for the past twenty-four hours has been the stash of morels we keep in the shallow hole near the door.

Something isn't right. I'm acutely aware of Draco's heightened attention.

It doesn't surprise me when I'm jolted awake after midnight to the empty cave, dark and ominous. The air feels thinner, as if the magic faltered while I slept, which causes me to shoot my eyes open in fear. I reach to pull the covers up in response to the chill in the room and hear a deep, terrifying voice.

"Hello, love."

Chapter 9: Hot and Cold

Chapter Summary

"Who's gonna save me
Who's gonna save me now
Who's gonna save me
Who's gonna save me now
Can you hear me calling out
Who's gonna save me"
-Who's Gonna Save Me, Anne Schulze

Chapter Notes

Hello all! I hope you're staying warm! Here's the chapter I promised. One note, I told you at the front that this story was DARK. This chapter contains rape and domestic violence. DO NOT read if that is not your bag.

However, this is a turning point. You are about to get a lot more answers in the coming chapters. And you'll learn more about everyone's motivations!

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Fear shoots through my chest in painful shards as I lunge toward the pile of flat stones I use for a bedside table. I grasp for my wand and realize in horror that my wooden lifeline is missing.

"No!" I cry out in a guttural moan. I fist my hand and thump it against the rock, squeezing my eyes shut because I'm afraid to confirm that he's here.

The cave flickers with the eerie glow of my bluebell flames. They're the only source of light that can withstand the moisture in the air and is safe to burn while we sleep.

When I take a deep breath and gather the courage, I crack my eyes. The shadow of Draco's menacing, dark figure looms in a chair near the corner. He's sitting back, unconcerned by my fear, and I notice his heavy hands resting on the arms of the chair. His legs are spread wide while he taps his finger on his wand. I sense his anger and greed through the bond— a potent combination.

"It's been a while, sweetheart," his deceptively calm voice creeps through the damp cavern.

I throw back the covers and leap towards the door but Draco's too fast. He rises from his seat and meets me at the center of the room, fisting the back of my hair. The roots of my curls threaten to tear from my scalp, and my eyes water in response. He tilts my head towards him, and I reach for my crown to release the tension of his grip.

"Ahh!" I yelp.

"Uh uh, I can't have you running off again," he purrs. "I just got here."

My skin crawls as he talks, and my anxiety causes my muscles to freeze.

"Sir?" calls a voice from the mouth of the cave.

We aren't alone?

Draco turns toward the wizard and barks, "We're fine. Stay at your post. My wife's just excited to see me." He turns back to me and tilts my head further so that I meet his eyes. "Aren't you?"

He's pissed, but I snarl at him in response. Draco warned me never to run from him again. I knew it was useless— he'd catch up with me eventually, or I'd cave and crawl back to him, but now I see how much my escape affected him.

We stare at one another in silence as a million unspoken moments pass between us before he demands, "Now go lay down. Let's talk."

I fall back onto the thin mattress where Draco deposits me, realizing that he immobilized me with a wandless, wordless spell to emphasize his magical strength.

He brushes off his shirt, then stalks my way. I feel my heart pumping in my chest as my wide eyes track each footfall. When Draco reaches my cot, he squats down to my eye level, gazing at me with chilling condescension.

Draco's anger recedes as he begins to gloat. He acts as if I'm not his prisoner—he's not my warden, but instead, we are those lovers that I once knew us to be. The problem is that we both know the truth now.

"You've lost weight," he tilts his head and hums as he wraps his long, firm fingers around my upper arm and squeezes. "I've been so worried about you."

"Where's Remus?" I demand as I try not to let on how scared I feel.

"The wolf?" He coos. "We finally got him." My stomach drops as he continues. "Surely, you've put together that that's how the Fidelius faltered."

A tear falls down my cheek in fury as I take in his meaning. "He's dead?" I ask, voice shaking.

"Shh," Draco soothes while wiping the wetness from my cheeks. "Don't cry, shh." His tone is pure butter, silky and neat. He's a cocky bastard. There's no need to show anger when you've already captured your prey.

"Dry your eyes. I'm here. You're safe," he says.

Draco's proximity sends tiny pinpricks over my skin. It feels like when I've let my hand fall asleep, and then all the blood rushes back in at once. With him so close, the suppressant I downed earlier doesn't stand a chance. I notice the acute pain of his influence flooding back into my system and cleansing my core. Months of separation felt like torture, and the potion helped to keep me numb, but now the floodgates are open—I feel again. I brace myself as the torment and thirst for his touch assault my senses. With each sting of energy moving within me, I grow more desperate, complacent, and obedient because his touch feels like home. His scent smells like sin. The bond vibrates with pleasure leaving me panting.

"Breathe, Hermione. There you go," he says as he watches the minute changes in my expression.

This man controls my every move. I moan again, but this time in painful desire. Finally, he croons, "Look at you. I told you not to run from me." He rubs his thumb over my straining nipple. Even through my cotton shirt, the sensation almost makes me cum.

"That bastard had you on tranquilizers," he growls. "You're a mess. He should have sent you back to me."

"No stop, please. I don't want this. I never wanted this," I plead. "I— You forced me. You're — you're a—" My words are jumbled together in a tangled mass. Even as I sputter my insults, I lean into his hand, seeking more.

"What am I?" He inquires while dipping one of his hands lower to pull my shorts down my hips.

Draco's spell still pins me to the bed as I start to understand what he intends to do next. I'm furious and gushing at the thought of it. "A rapist," I sneer.

"No, baby, I'm your husband," he counters in a kind voice. "I feel how desperate you are for my touch." Draco dips a finger between my swollen lips as he talks; I feel the long line of creamy moisture that catches on his digit and follows in his wake. The movement sends shockwaves of ecstasy through my veins. "I know it's been hard for you." Just as I start to pant, he pulls his hand away to roll the evidence of my arousal between his thumb and middle finger. Then, his expression darkens, and he cuffs my throat. "But, your actions forced me to suffer too."

His eyes are obsidian— thin silver irises surrounding deep black pools. I feel through the bond, his tight balance between control and the need to let go— it's eating away at him.

"I bet you want to make it up to me, don't you?" He asks, not waiting for an answer. Instead, he drops his hand to my sex again, then strokes a lazy path through my wetness, and I can no longer catch my breath. I'm reduced to sensation and need.

Fuck, I wish he didn't know exactly what makes my body tick.

Draco unbuckles himself and climbs into bed, saying, "I'm going to release my spell because I know you'll be good. Right?"

I nod.

"That's my girl." He praises, hovering over me with his weight on his left arm and pulling himself from his waistband. Even in the darkness, I can see his throbbing cock, waiting for relief. "Now, open your legs for me."

Despite myself, my hips fall open at his command. Maybe once this is over, I can clear my senses and find a new way to escape. Plus, if I run again and continue to ache with need, I have to sate my hunger before I go.

Draco pushes in.

I feel each inch as he moves. He stretches my walls adding delicious tension to my already taught sex. All the blood in my body moves to my pulsing bundle of nerves.

I hear Draco sigh into my neck as he starts to move. The rhythm feels right and good like the stars have aligned again, and the world is set straight. He pumps into me, losing his calm facade as he growls his pleasure with each thrust.

I begin to float. The sensations are too much for me to handle, and it causes an out-of-body experience. The whiplash from artificial numbness to fear, to flying is intense. I ride Draco's rock-hard shaft while realizing I could be happy spending the rest of my life pinned beneath his weight. Then Draco shoves his forearm between our bodies and pinches my clit with his thumb and pointer.

"Fuuuck!" I yell in response to his iron grip. Draco doesn't move his hand, but the jostling from his hips slamming into me causes him to press harder. I scream again, "Oh, gods. Oh, fuck, oh, Fuck!"

I start to squirm, hoping to add just enough friction to launch myself over the precipice and into oblivion, but Draco demands, "Enough!"

My movements still at his command, and I'm forced to lie and wait. It feels so good it hurts. "Ahhh! Yes, ah nnggghh," I suck in a tight breath through clenched teeth as he rolls his hips, rubbing up against his hold on my clit.

Time and space no longer have meaning. Right and wrong don't exist. All that matters is the sweet, torturous pressure my partner places on my sex.

"Apologize to me, love, " he says between thrusts.

It takes me a moment to register his order but then I hear myself crying.

"I'm sorry, Draco."

"Try again, call me, Sir. mmm Fuck." The sensation is bringing Draco close to the edge.

I'm too far gone to argue—too scared, too delirious from the sudden withdrawal of the suppressant's protection. "I'm sorry, Sir," I mewl.

"For what?" He pries further while shoving my shirt up and biting down on my hardened peak.

"Holy shit!" I yell. The feeling is too much. "For running, Sir.

"Hmm," He hums in mock frustration. "I didn't want to have to Oblivate you again."

His voice chills my spine as he begins to massage my sex between his fingers. My body tenses, and I feel him spilling into me. Draco rests his forehead against mine as he lets the pleasure roll over his shoulders. He sucks in a tight breath, and I feel him pumping into me in violent ropes. He's feral, as if the distance reduced him to an animal, determined to exhibit his authority in the basest of fashions.

I gasp as the torrent of release drips from me. Draco's completion and the mirrored sensations shoot me into an orgasm so intense it's painful. I'm soaring through the air on dangerous energy to match the bittersweet reunion. I've been a puddle of nerves and arousal for four months, and now that pent-up want is shooting through my body. I scream into Draco's chest as he still hasn't moved.

The fevered thrumming of our bodies is intense as we continue to hold one another to ride out wave after wave of rapture. I count Draco's heartbeats as we begin to come down. It drums against my chest, and my rhythm begins to match his—we're finally synchronized once more to each other's pull. The weight of the moment feels oppressive.

After several minutes, Draco clears his throat and runs his hand through his hair as if his fierce, possessive hunger is satisfied for the time being. Then, he slides from between my legs and sits up, resting his elbows on his wide knees and hanging his head. Without turning back to me he casts a contraceptive charm.

I take a chance and beg, "Draco, I had to know more. Please," my voice cracks as I speak, "—please don't wipe my memories."

"Sir? calls the voice from the door. Draco's head turns towards the interruption with a harsh scowl. "Sir. We need to move. It's not safe here."

I hear him mumble something that sounds like *this is too much* before he barks, "Get up," and then pushes to his feet.

The bond compels me to do as he says, but I move slowly. I need a minute to figure out my next steps. So I wait as Draco uses a quick cleansing spell, tucks himself back into his pants, and straightens his clothing and hair.

I'm defeated, but my mind still churns with possibilities. Draco finishes and eyes me with a stern nonverbal directive to *get going*. In response, I try my best to clean myself without a wand, then pull my shorts back up my hips, feeling his sticky cum in my knickers. It's humiliating. He holds out his hand to help me from the bed, but I avoid his eyes and stand on my own. I don't let my head fall too low in submission. He may have me cornered, but I'm not beaten yet.

"What do you want to bring home?" He asks while casting a derisive glance at the dark surroundings of the sparse cave.

There's no way around it. I have to go with him until I have a viable plan. "Just the small bag on the table by the door," I whisper.

I'm not sure what's in it, but Remus always brought it with him when he left our hideout. It's one of the reasons I knew something was off the other day. He was gone, but the bag waited by the door where he always dropped it. I assume he was too grieve-stricken to grab it on his way out.

Draco storms over to the table and fists the satchel. It's no bigger than his hand, and I watch as he squeezes it and peers inside. Something significant crosses his expression before he catches himself. "It's empty," he says with a curious lift of his brows. I just shrug, so he tosses it in my direction, then demands, "Let's go."

I give one last look to my strange hideaway and say goodbye to the memory of Remus, my friend, as Draco places a hand on my lower back to lead me out the cavern door. Our movement feels odd because I've not been through the door yet, having dropped in the first night and never leaving until this moment. We walk through a short tunnel and then up a dirt path before stepping out into the thick cover of trees.

"We're still in the forest?" I mutter to Draco as he follows me out.

"Yes," he says in a clipped response. "It's why it took so long to find you. This cave was beneath both the Fidelius and the wards placed on the woods themselves." Then, he turns to the three guards waiting outside and growls, "Just a moment."

Draco shifts back to me, and I hear the guard ask with a nervous stutter, "Sir? We really need to get moving. We've heard noises in the trees. They know we're here. Can you make it quick?"

"I just need to get something over with so that she doesn't cause us any trouble on the way," Draco offers in a grave retort.

Instantly, I'm terrified again as I realize Draco intends to wipe my mind here in front of these men.

He grabs the back of my neck and lifts his wand toward my forehead, but I yell out, "Wait! Please!" It doesn't stop him, so I try to jump back and plead, "Please! I know things now! Remus told me about my past!"

Draco's eyes blow wide, and he suddenly looks frightened. "That's enough!" He spits, and the next thing I know, he hastens toward me again. His break in character is the opening I need. I realize he doesn't want the guards to hear, so I bellow.

"I learned things!"

As I yell, I try my best to hold off Draco and crane around his massive frame to catch the eyes of the other men. "—Things Voldemort will want to know!"

My voice seems to slice through the air. I see pure malice in Draco's eyes as he stares me down and then shifts to bark orders at the men standing behind us.

I see confusion etched on their features as they start to wonder why their Master's protégé is trying to wipe the mind of the Order member he's been tasked with retrieving information from. "W—we should take her to Voldemort, right? Sir? Wouldn't he want her memories in tact?"

"She's obviously lying, you idiot!" Draco orders the men around with a bone-chilling intensity. "I checked her mind just now before we came out. Are you questioning me?"

The men begin to look uneasy. They're stuck between doing what they think Voldemort wants and what Draco demands of them. They struggle to respond, and Draco continues.

"I have strict orders from Voldemort to ascertain everything she remembers and otherwise keep her calm so that her mind can heal and we can extract more information."

Draco is lying about using Legilimency on me in the cave, making me wonder what game he is playing. "She hasn't learned anything of consequence yet," he continues. "However, if you want to explain to the Dark Lord that the international travel damaged her mind, and now she's completely useless to us, be my guest."

I watch the men become more uneasy with every word Draco utters.

Draco's reasoning seems to shut the others up for the time being, so he turns back to me. I feel the forest closing in as my heart races. I'm running out of options. I throw caution to the wind when he once again lifts his wand.

"HELP! Firenze! Anyone!" I scream.

Next, several things happen at once in a chaotic blur of action. First, I see an arrow zing through the air and clip the shoulder of one of the guards. He yells in pain as another arrow shoots within an inch of Draco's nose. Furious, he grabs onto me with an iron grip, and I watch as everyone begins to Apparate away from the trees. Everyone around me is yelling, but I'm so relieved that the centaurs decided to step into the fray.

Seizing on my opportunity, I lunge away from Draco, trying to break loose from his hold. Instead, he roars in anger, and the back of his hand cracks across my face. The motion stuns me. Pain shoots through my cheek, and my ears ring. My eyes roll back in my head, then everything goes black.

"Millie!" I hear someone yell.

The sound is funny, as if I'm underwater.

"Millie! *God damn it!!* Where are you!"

My head throbs, and I'm confused. The lights are bright here, and the air feels dry as I'm slumped into an uncomfortable chair. Squinting, I take in the sight in front of me. The movement causes me to suck in a pained, shallow breath, but I catch Draco's face hovering in front of me with deep concern across his features.

"I is here, Master." a voice squeaks, then, "Oh my! Mrs. is hurt!"

Everything hurts. I clutch at my head to try and relieve the earth-shattering headache, but I don't dare try to move my jaw.

"Clearly!" Draco snarls. "Get some Dittany and a Pepper-up potion— maybe some Skelegrow too! Though—" his voice trails off as I feel him take hold of my chin and tilt my face from side to side. "—I'm not sure if it's broken. I think an Episkey might do. It looks like it may just be cracked."

Once the shock breaks my consciousness, I attempt to sit up, sneering through clenched teeth, "You *hit* me, you **Bastard!**"

"Enough!" Draco's anger is reaching new levels. He silences me as he works to heal my injuries.

The Episkey works, and I feel sudden relief from the splitting headache. Now everything feels dull as I recover from the shock. Millie brings the potions, and I refuse at first—out of spite—but Draco crouches down again to hold my chin and catch my eyes.

"Please?" His soft-spoken request stuns me. I sit up straighter and watch him with a curious expression. "Please, Hermione. I'm—I'm so sorry."

I glare daggers at him but allow him to dip the potion down my throat. I hate to admit it, but something feels right about how he tends to me, even though I'm fully aware that his gentle hands caused the damage. As the last of the pain eases from my cheek and my searing headache melts away, I notice Draco's hands shaking. It's slight, but I catch it.

There's a moment of silence as we sit in our opulent atrium, taking in the gravity of all that just happened.

However, once he's sure I'm okay, Draco stands to leave. He stomps toward his office but only makes it a few feet before whipping back around, threatening, "Try the doors again."

He throws his arms out to point at the ornate entrance to our home. "Go ahead! I've had months to strengthen the enchantments designed to keep you here." Something cracks in his resolve. He gives a small, ironic laugh, then cries to the ceiling, "Heaven forbid I try to keep your Gryffindor ass safe!!"

I can see the tiny fissures in his facade. Something has shaken him to his core. This Draco isn't the scary, calm, collected Draco I'm used to seeing. The shift throws me off. I'm unsure if I should still be on my guard for him to wipe my mind or even backhand me again or if the danger has passed.

I squirm in my chair, considering his volatility and trying to scope my safest action.

"Merlin, help me if I do what *you* asked of me!" Draco growls.

Anger rises within, and I can't stop biting back, "I didn't ask for *any* of this!"

I can't fathom how he expects to blame me for anything. "You captured me, forced me to bond, kept me here and lied to me for years! Don't you *dare* accuse me of anything, you arrogant prick!"

Draco paces back and forth. Finally, he fists his hair and snarls, "*I never wanted any of this!!*"

He's manic now, and it's starting to scare me. "You get to forget! *You* get to be the *victim!!*" He thrusts a finger in my direction. "Did you ever think what this would be like for me, Hermione!?"

I'm confused again. Draco's doing that thing where it sounds like he's talking to a younger version of myself.

"Did you ever think what you were asking of me? To let you hate me!? To—to—," He holds his hands in front of his face in horror.

The air stands still as I try to make sense of his manic ranting. This insufferable man just hunted me down, threatened to wipe my mind, assaulted me, and now he has the nerve to rant

about what I've done to him!?

"I don't want to hear any more of your narcissistic sob story!" I can't stand to look at him right now. However, he doesn't seem like he will attempt to Oblivate me again, so I feel more confident as I let out my ire.

He closes the distance between us in a few strides and towers above me, sending ice through my veins, but I refuse to let him intimidate me.

"Go ahead, Draco! Hit me again!" I clench my jaw as I try to pull all my courage forward, but I hate myself when I still hear my voice shake. I wipe the furious tear from my cheek with the back of my forearm and offer him a nonverbal challenge.

The air between us charges with ten thousand unspoken thoughts and questions. Draco's hard expression falls.

He takes a deep breath and looks as though he's about to tell me something. Though before he gets a chance to utter his next word, pain lances through his arm, causing him to grab it in shock.

"Damn it!!"

We both know what the pain means.

Voldemort is calling.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think it was that bothered Draco so much? I'd love to hear your thoughts!

Happy Holidays!

Chapter 10: Granger

Chapter Summary

Little do you know
How I'm breakin' while you fall asleep
Little do you know
I'm still haunted by the memories
Little do you know
I'm tryin' to pick myself up piece by piece
Little do you know
I need a little more time

...

Little do you know
I know you're hurt while I'm sound asleep
Little do you know
All my mistakes are slowly drownin' me
Little do you know
I'm tryin' to make it better piece by piece
Little do you know I
I love you 'til the sun dies

- Little Did You Know, Alex & Sierra

Chapter Notes

Annnnd we're back!

Draco bends at his waist, fists his hair, and bellows, "ARRGH!" before straightening.

I watch as he takes several breaths, then closes his eyes and tilts his head to the ceiling, drawing upon inner strength.

"I'm not going to fight you anymore, Hermione."

"Well, that makes one of us!" I snap back.

"I've tried to put off this moment because I love you, but it's time," he says, then takes a long slow breath.

The past few hours have been a nightmare. I want to scratch at Draco's face, hex him to oblivion, and grab a portkey out of this godforsaken hell hole.

"Time for what!?!!" I demand. I'm sick of his cryptic comments and lies. "Remus told me everything!"

I rage at Draco because the anger keeps me from falling back into the trap of desire. I can feel his pull from several feet away, and I fight the urge to tuck myself under his arm and place soft kisses on his jaw.

He says he loves me and tries to give me hope that this nightmare isn't all a lie — that we really did care for one another. But I know the truth.

I pace as I spit, "Remus told me about how I was on the run with Harry Potter. He told me we tried to bring down Voldemort."

Draco stares while I yell. From his ominous proclamation and the look of resolve in his gaze, I can tell he's made some decision. The thought frightens me. I don't know what he has planned, but if he wants to drag me in front of his *master*, I'll need an escape route. Nothing good will come from another visit with that maniac.

I continue, "Remus saw me during my time on the run. He heard things from other Order members too, like Bill Weasley. We apparently stayed with him for a bit and you know what no one saw that year?" I look him right in the eye as I answer my rhetorical question, "You."

Draco raises a condescending eyebrow. Of course, he knows exactly what I'm getting at.

"Not once! You were apparently here the night I got tortured by your lovely aunt, but other than that. Not a single person saw us together." I'm shaking and furious, gathering the courage to admit something I've known for a while. I reach into my back pocket and pull out the photo he gave me of us on our wedding day. I don't know how he fabricated it, but none of that matters now. The picture is tattered and bent from my many hours of pouring over its details. I huff a shallow laugh. I wasted all of that time. I was never going to find the real me in this scene.

As I steal myself to admit the truth, I crumple the photo in my fist.

Draco scrutinizes my every move as he senses the worst of my ire coming and offers his permission.

"Go on," he says in a calm, confident tone.

I throw my hands out, snarling, "Everything we had was a lie! You bound me to you after the war ended and kept me under your thumb for *years*." Tears well up in my eyes, and I use the back of my arm to wipe them away.

He admitted to holding me hostage before I escaped, but a small part of me hoped there was still some truth to our love. I wanted to believe that he and I had a star-crossed love affair

before I lost my memories. I was desperate to uncover that he cared for me. The bond feels so genuine that my chest aches, knowing it's all manufactured.

The large atrium suddenly falls silent in the wake of my accusation. The weight of my words reverberates around the halls with a penetrating thrum. But I don't let it stop my outburst. I want to cut my *husband* as deeply as he's cut me.

"You say that I like it better when we pretend," I sneer. "I think you got that wrong, *love*. You're obliterating me to keep me docile and unaware. You don't have any intention of discovering my memories because *you're* the one who likes to play house."

Draco's eyes narrow as I rail at him.

"Well, I've already put together most of the story. I just need a few more pieces," I spit.

Draco pulls in another tight breath and clenches his fist. Voldemort summoned him again. After a beat, he shakes his hand to release the pain from his arm. His resolve is etched into his hard exterior as he takes in everything I've said.

"You'll never find the memories of what happened at the Battle on Hogwarts. They're not there."

The cold truth of his statement knocks the air out of my lungs.

He takes a step back, stares at his hands for a moment then growls. "And, I guess I've become the evil bastard you say I am."

Draco turns to walk away, leaving me reeling. I'm not sure what he means by anything at this point. He climbs the steps toward our bedroom, so I take the opportunity to try the front doors. Unfortunately, though, I suspect that he told one truth tonight. They wouldn't open for me. My head feels fuzzy as I move. The medicines he plied me with work, but I've been through a lot.

I evaluate my options regarding where to run or hide from Draco before he returns. I don't like the sound of his cryptic statement, *It's time*, and I'm not willing to wait to find out what he meant.

Draco enters our bedroom as he reaches the top of the steps, so though I recognize it's probably useless, I race up the steps two at a time. I head to the third floor, hoping he left some Muggle electronics.

When I reach the room, I throw open the door and scan the space with my chest heaving. It's empty. Draco must have removed everything once I escaped. The window is closed, but I run to it anyway, trying in vain to wrench it open. There's no Floo powder on the mantel of the fire. I'm wandless, but my palms still itch to wield magic.

"You *would* come up here." Draco says behind me.

Dread fills my stomach as I whip around to find him leaning against the doorway with his battle robe on. Remus told me that Voldemort's closest followers are called Death Eaters.

Lovely name. He looks terrifying, draped in his uniform, and I shake from the awareness that he has cornered me.

Though, his eyes look kind.

"Hermione —," his deep voice catches in his throat. I see *him* in his expression. *My Draco*, the one I thought I knew. A tear falls down my cheek. The vulnerability he shows causes me to drop my guard just long enough for him to Immobilize me again. "— this better *fucking* work."

I'm screaming on the inside. I hate feeling this defenseless. I don't want Draco near me. I can't let him near me. I'll forget myself if I let him get too close. I'm furious, but I start to melt as he approaches.

Draco reaches a hand to brush my hair behind my ears, and I'm back in his gravitational pull. Proximity to his touch causes my mind to cloud and my senses to heighten. I whine, thinking back to all the nights we spent in the library, curled together, reading. Or the hundreds of moments we shared in each other's arms, comforting one another. His scent envelopes me, and I find the safety I've longed for. It was always right here.

"You and I bonded on Grasmoor one week before the Battle on Hogwarts," he states with total confidence. He places our wedding photo back into my palm. I must have dropped it downstairs. "I loved you then more than life itself. You're a part of me." He pauses. "— the best part of me."

I'm desperate to believe him, but my heart aches knowing he's spinning another web of lies. Remus told me what happened, and Draco's account doesn't add up.

"Know this, love — " The look in his eyes guts me. I see sincerity, grief, and determination. "I did my part. It's your turn now." He bends his head to place a soft kiss on my lips. I feel them tingle as he pulls away, and I want to run my tongue over the whisper they left.

My heartbeat begins to pick up as I lean into his embrace. The strings of our entwined magical cores hum with pleasure. The feeling is disorientating and delicious. He's right; we are connected in ways I can't understand. It's as if we're one.

"Come back to us so that we can—," his voice breaks, "—finish what we started." he places a small object in my hand and taps it with his wand, causing it to spin.

Draco turns to leave. I feel his magical hold on me spark as the door closes in his wake. I look to see what he gave me and find a golden top, whirling around and around. As I lift it to get a better look, something strange happens. The room begins to spin, and the lights dim. I feel thrown off by the swirling magic. The emotional load of everything I've been through over the past few hours catches up with me as the object flits on its axis. The pull of my anchor to Draco feels stretched and tied in knots as the force of everything causes me to crumple to the ground.

No, I won't do that. I don't care who it saves!

Please, you have to believe me!

Everything's changed. You changed it.

In my sleep, I hear swirling whisps of conversations. Echos of the past and the future, calling out.

I'm lost to time and space, whirling through possibilities and intentions. My mind is muddled. I can't think straight.

Then everything goes black.

"Hermione?"

I crane over my shoulder to catch Draco's tall figure in the doorway.

"Hey there," I smile. I'm happy to see him in the library. He's been so distant lately. No matter how lovely our time together in the Manor has been, sadness plagues him.

I see it in Draco's eyes sometimes, and it causes me to want to kiss away his aches and pains. I grieve that he knows so much — he holds so much.

The sadness happened again today. Draco stared at me warmly, handing me a plate of pastries for breakfast. It was a typical morning where I felt confused by my limited mind but happy to be with him. As I reached for a scone, I babbled on about a scary dream I had the night before where I kept running around in the woods searching for him. It was silly, honestly. In the nightmare, I dropped to the ground and called for help, but no one came running. I was left alone on the forest floor.

"Of course you'd save me, right! You wouldn't let anything happen to me," I prattled on in a self-deprecating manner.

That's when it happened. The sadness crept into Draco's eyes.

He spent the rest of the morning in his study, alone. I let him be, as I always do when that happens. Instead, I came to the library and spent my time knitting.

"What are you working on?" He asks as he walks across the room and meets me where I sit.

I lift the oblong sack to the light. My eyebrows lower in concentration, and I try flipping the creation over to look it at from a different angle. Does it look like a *giant sock*?

"Honestly, I'm not sure," I admit. "It's just muscle memory. I sit with the yarn, get lost in my thoughts, and keep producing these weird colorful blobs." I offer a wan smile, hoping to

lighten his mood. On any other day, this strange behavior of mine might depress me, but I need to hold it together right now for Draco's benefit.

He's so strong, and I know he wants to do everything he can to keep me happy and healthy. But I see how much his responsibilities weigh on his shoulders.

"Is everything alright?" I ask in a timid voice as a warm smile creeps across his expression. "Did I say something wrong?"

Draco holds out his hand to take my craft project from me. Then, after rolling up the yarn and setting it aside, he sits next to me, pulling me into his arms. "No, sweetheart. It's nothing. I'm sorry for my mercurial mood," he croons into my neck. "I love you."

I shift to face him and kiss him with tenderness. "I love you too, Draco."

It's the first time I remember offering those words to him, and Draco clearly realizes this fact. The air between us sparks and tingles at the back of my neck. I feel the moment etching itself into my core memories. The thought causes me to ache with longing.

Please, gods, let me keep this memory.

I feel Draco's growl of approval. He places his forehead on mine and pulls in a deep breath. I sense him warring with himself and want to take away his troubles. I twist to straddle his legs and feel him harden beneath me. The skirt of my thin dress pushes up my thighs, and my white panties moisten.

Draco draws back the string that cinches together the soft fabric over my full breasts. I decided to forgo a bra earlier in hopes that I might be able to coax him from his sour mood. The outfit is scandalous. I would never wear something this revealing in public. Though, in our home, I enjoyed the feel of the material against my skin. My sensitive nipples were hard all morning, awaiting his deft touch.

I hear the clink of Draco's belt as he frees himself. He places one large hand on my hip to steady me, then pulls my knickers aside with the crook of his finger and finds his way home in my embrace.

Our world is right again.

No, I won't do that. I don't care who it saves!

Please, you have to believe me!

Everything's changed. You changed it.

My head pounds, and my throat is dry when I wake. My cheek rests against the thick pile of the handwoven Persian rug. The room is dark. No sconces burn. I drag myself into a sitting position and hug my knees to my chest. Whatever Draco handed me knocked me on my ass. It takes several long moments to get my bearings straight. I have a hard time making sense of what happened.

I'm still on the third floor, but Draco is no longer in sight. My stomach grumbles as I hang my head between my knees and rub the back of my neck. I start to calculate when I last ate. Regardless, the food at Order Headquarters left much to be desired. I need to eat something.

I stumble to the attached bathroom and dip my head under the faucet to pull long drags of water. My headache begins to fade as I catch my breath at the sink, staring at my reflection. Draco healed my wounds, but my face still feels tender as I press my finger to my cheekbone. My hair falls in big waves down my back, and my plain, white shirt is ripped, exposing more cleavage than I would like. There weren't any mirrors in the cavern with Remus, so it's been a while since I've seen myself. I no longer look like the naïve little dove I saw staring back at me before. I look fierce. It's as if I'm wiser somehow. Realizing the change in my appearance, I try to lean into that confidence. I'm going to need it.

I look down at my bare legs and pull at the jean shorts I threw on after Draco's aggressive reunion.

Eat, find new clothes, and develop a plan.

Just then, the door slams in the bedroom.

The sound jolts me from my private inspection and draws me to the bathroom door to face my next challenge. I don't know what I'm walking into, but I'm sure as hell not going to cower in the bathroom waiting for Draco to find me.

As I creep into the room, I pause. Draco is facing the door. He leans against the wood, bracing himself on his forearm as if torn up by some internal struggle.

Something about him looks off — different somehow.

I shift my weight to one side and fold my arms, waiting for him to acknowledge my presence. However, he stays at the door with his chest rising and falling as he slows his angry breathing. Even in the dark, I can see how tense his shoulders look. If Draco is this upset, it doesn't mean good things for me, but I can't help myself. I want to control our next argument as much as possible, so I clear my throat to take the upper hand.

Draco whirls around and raises his wand in my direction before I even stop coughing. He shoots across the room toward me, locking my right wrist in a bone-crushing grasp, and twists me around, pinning my hand behind my back. "What the fuck!?"

"God damn it! Draco! I can't take anymore! It's too much, you Bastard!" I wiggle, trying to throw him off. "What did you give me? What the hell is going on!"

I feel Draco shift, and the lights suddenly flare to life.

"Granger!?"

I am going to kill this man! I can't understand his motivations from one moment to the next, and it drives me batshit crazy. I yell out in frustration and stomp on his toes as hard as possible. "Oh, now you're happy to call me by my maiden name!"

"Argh!" he yells in pain. He loosens his hold on me, and for a second, I think I might break free. But then he recovers, fisting my hair and slamming me into the wall. He presses my arm against the stone with his forearm causing me to yelp.

"What are you talking about, you swotty bitch? What are you doing in my house!?"

I lose it, clamming up and letting my tears fall. Draco takes in my expression and watches me cry with a skeptical side-eye. I watch his gaze shift to the hand he has pinned to the wall and his brows furrow. Then he takes in the rest of my appearance, and I see his expression change again. His eyes widen.

"Where's your wand?" he huffs. "And, since when do you look like *this*?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to know where you put my wand!?" I try to push from his hold again. Then, as I squirm, I spit, "Don't you dare start with me about my appearance. I haven't had much time to freshen up since you showed up last night."

Draco shifts, looking confused. Time slows as I get the chance to scrutinize his features. His hair is a bit longer, and his robes look different. I shake my arm free and lift my hand to brush my fingers over the place near his temple where a tiny, jagged scar is missing.

The air around us pulses. Draco rears back at my touch but pauses and watches me like a hawk. I close my eyes and dip into our bond. It's there, but it feels different. It's like the connection is further away. I feel a pull toward him, but not to the same extent as I'm used to feeling.

He looks less tired — more youthful.

Realization slams into me as I yell out to my Bastard of a husband.

"What did you do!?"

Chapter 11: The Night We Met

Chapter Summary

I had all and then most of you
Some and now none of you
Take me back to the night we met
I don't know what I'm supposed to do
Haunted by the ghost of you
Oh, take me back to the night we met

-The Night We Met, Corvyx & Joey Dean

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Granger, what the fuck is going on?" Draco demands while cuffing my throat. My mind churns as I start to put everything together. I never saw a time turner — that I recall! But I read a lot about them, and Remus said that I used one in my third year of Hogwarts. I dart my eyes around the floor, looking for the gold top Draco placed in my hand. But, unfortunately, I don't see it anywhere.

Draco sent me back in time?

I try to recall what he said before he shoved me back to who-knows-when. It was something about 'my turn?' My turn for what? I sift through my recent memories, trying to find any clues to help me navigate this new challenge. I'm so *sick!* of adapting to different information and environments. I'm starving, my head aches, and I can't think straight. I moan in frustration as he tightens his hold to garner my attention.

"Granger!"

"Stop!" I croak. "I don't have a wand. I'm not here to cause any trouble. Please, let me explain!"

Draco laughs. "Like you could cause any trouble. I've got you around the neck, witch. Where's Potter? What are you up to?! Do you have any idea how easily I could hand you over to Voldemort??"

I reach my hands up toward his hold on my neck and try to pry him off me. It would have been nice if my asshole of a husband would have given me my wand before he thrust me back in time. I cough. This Draco feels more dangerous somehow. He's more impulsive, and there's a change to his expression. Draco's eyes always held something for me. There were times recently when he showed me his worst, but even then, there was a depth to how he looked at me. His gaze indicated a shared and profound history. And when he was kind, his eyes held a tenderness — a devotion to me. It was one of the reasons that I found it hard to give up on the hope of our relationship.

This Draco's eyes are cold.

"Your room!"

He stills. "What about it?"

"There's blue tile in the shower. You don't like to admit it, but green has never been your favorite color."

Draco bristles. His brows lower, and he leans further into me. "You've been in my god-damned room? How long have you been snooping around my house? And what the bloody hell is going on with the wards?" He casts his eyes around the room, scowling at the walls, as he asks that last question.

"No! No, you sent me — I've not been snooping." This isn't working. I need to think of something more convincing. I wrack my brain for anything that might de-escalate the situation. I need to think of something that would have been true in the past, and only Draco would know. "You wear reading glasses! And, you have a freckle on your ribcage, and you — you —" Fuck! My limited fucking memories! "You have an elf named Millie and you —"

I see his fury boil in his confusion. I can't tell if anything I've said is getting through to him. However, he then glowers, takes a deep breath, and pulls back to touch his hand to his chest. He looks stunned by what he feels.

He must sense our bond!

I realize this might be my surest tactic. Draco won't be able to refute the draw we have to one another. But I decide against giving him all the information at once. That might backfire. Instead, I cry, "We're tied to one another! Pay attention! Can't you feel it?" I drop my hand to his chest and place my palm over his heart. Feel it. Please, feel it. This isn't made up. This is real. Whatever the circumstances were around our bonding, there is no mistaking that Draco and I are bound to one another. "Please!"

The air stills as Draco closes his eyes, tapping into his magical core. It's the briefest of pauses but incredibly important. After a moment, his eyes shoot open. He looks terrified by what he discovers. Draco's jaw drops as if to say something. But then, before he can respond, he lets go of me and grabs his forearm while pulling in a quick, pained breath.

I know that look. I've seen it several times. I saw it happen just before I arrived at this time. Voldemort is summoning him.

He roars in anger and stares me down a moment longer before turning to walk out.

As he stomps toward the door, I yell, "Please, I'll leave! Just forget you saw me." I can find more information if I sneak out of the Manor. Then, I could make my way back to the Forbidden Forest and hideout. Draco pauses with his back to me and seems to be contemplating something, then he flexes his hand and continues toward the door. I chase after him to reach the door before he leaves, but Draco flicks his wand to his side and slows my movements with an Arresto Momentum. "Please, Draco. Don't tell anyone that I'm here!"

He throws several wards up on the door and storms out.

After I watch him walk out, I flop down on the edge of the bed, feeling defeated. I strain my ears for a few seconds to hear anything happening outside of my newest prison but catch nothing. My attention leaves the door when my stomach cramps from hunger. A few mushrooms two days ago won't hold me for long. I have to find a way to get some food, but I'm not stupid enough to think the door will open for me. One thing I'm sure of is that my husband loves to keep me locked away.

I push off the bed and pace the room. I need to figure out what to do next. I can't stay here like a sitting duck, and I don't know how long I'll be in this time. I catalog what I know about time turners. They're rare. They send you back a few hours at a time. You have to be holding them to travel.

I scour the room in hopes of tinkering with the magical top to send me back to my time. It isn't anywhere in sight. Finally, however, I spy our wedding photo under the large ornate dresser. I must have dropped it when I fell to the ground. Realizing that I won't be able to find the time turner, I throw caution to the wind and whisper, "Millie?"

There's a *Pop!* and then the tiny elf stands by the fireplace wearing a pillowcase. Millie's ears lower as she scans the room in confusion and then finds me.

"Mrs.?"

I let out a long sigh of relief and run to her. "Millie, you recognize me! Please, I need your help. Can you get me out of here?" The Millie in the future seems committed to Draco's cause, but I know she also cares for me.

"No, Mrs." she squeaks. "I don't know you, but —" She lowers her voice. "—I feel your bond." Her little body shakes as she continues. "I see that you are a Malfoy and that —" She stops talking and starts wringing her hands together and mumbling something about 'trouble, trouble.' She's scared, but I feel she might be my only hope of escape.

"Okay! Then, can you get me out of here? Can you help —," I chance.

However, as I talk, she scurries to the door and holds her tiny hand to its wood. Then she spins around and interrupts me. "Master Draco set these wards." Her tone is firm.

I'm sunk.

"Yes, but *Mrs.* asked for help out of Master Draco's wards." I point at myself, pleading for her to recognize my authority.

Now the elf starts hopping back and forth on the balls of her toes as if she would rather be anywhere else. She shakes her head and pulls her ears down with her trembling hands.

Great.

She turns to leave, and I cry, "Can you at least send me some food?"

Pop! She's gone.

I stare at where she recently stood and begin to shake with anger. Nothing is going my way! I need —

There's another *Pop!* and thankfully, food appears on a silver tray at the desk. I notice a sandwich, an apple, and a glass of water. I race to grab the food and try not to inhale it too fast. The peanut butter is sweet on my tongue. The orange marmalade melts into the thick, soft bread. It's heavenly. I roll my eyes to the ceiling and let out a great sigh as I feel it begin to restore my energy.

Once I have some sustenance in my system, my mind clears. Draco doesn't return, so I think for hours as I wait. The sun rises and falls, and to my relief, simple meals continue to show up at steady intervals. I try to call Millie back to persuade her again, but she never shows up.

I'm still alone the second morning, so I sit on the window sill, dissecting my memories. Draco sent me back in time. He must've had a reason. I try to piece together everything I know about this time. Draco — young Draco? I go with the name because it is as good as any to keep the two men separate in my mind. *Young Draco* was shocked by my presence here, and Millie said she'd never met me before. That means it has to be a while ago. It would have to be before Old Draco — that thought makes me laugh until I consider that I'm old too. It would've been before *Old(er) Draco* started to keep me hostage. My stomach fills with lead. I begin to worry about how long I'll be here.

Surely not *that* long He's trying to scare me into being compliant.

I persevere for hours about what I'll do if I am left in this time for years. Then, I scold myself for feeling desperate to return to my time. What was so great about the future? I drop my head to my knees, wondering what I'm hoping to return to.

Draco.

He's my orbital axis and the bane of my existence. Over the past several months, I've seen a dark side of him, but I also caught flashes of the man I thought I married. I think for hours as the sun sets. Whatever Older Draco's plans for me were, I need to control my situation. Dread washes over me as I realize I've been in this time for over 48 hours — longer than any trip back in time I read about. I reluctantly come to terms with the fact that I might be here for a while.

In light of my realization, I make an important decision. I vow to do my best to mold this Draco into the version of himself that *I* want him to become. I know that he has the capacity for goodness. I've seen it. His morality just needs to be nurtured. I have no idea how long I'll be here. It may just be a few days. But, I know that small acts can lead to more significant implications in the future, and I commit myself to be the shift in butterfly wings needed to set my husband on a better course.

Hours later, the door finally creaks open. I shake from my thoughts and stand to greet Draco. As I do, I run my hand through my curls and tug at my clothes. I want to make a better impression. I took a shower to rinse all the grime and trauma off of myself. It felt rejuvenating. However, I still only had one outfit, so I had to wash my clothes by hand in the sink.

Draco stands with his back to the door, towering over the room and staring me down. I notice that he isn't wearing his Death Eater robes any longer. Instead, he's dressed more comfortably. Yet, I catch sight of new gashes on his arms and neck. Something happened since I saw him last.

After a tense, silent standoff, he demands, "What the hell is going on between us?"

I take care to deliver my news with caution when I speak. I'm not keen on the idea of being choked again.

"I don't know. You sent me back in time. You didn't tell me why."

He scoffs, then presses on, "I feel something." He rubs at his chest. "It's this aggravating sensation to be up here with you at all times." Then he scowls at me, "What did you do? What are you playing at?"

I lift my arm to him in a sign of openness, imploring him to listen. "I didn't do anything." I need him to believe me, so I drop the bomb I've been holding. "In the future, you and I are married." Sort of. I let that sit in the air between us for a moment and watch Draco's expression harden to stone.

His reaction causes my heart to sink. It confirms for me that we never had a relationship in this timeline. I brush off my grief and decide to continue on my course to create the life I want. So, I hasten to add, "I'm telling you the truth. I know we didn't get on in school, but we fell in love during the war."

"This is bullshit! Granger. '*We didn't get on?*' We hate each other. Now cut the shit and tell me what's really going on." He shifts his weight and drops his arm in outrage. I sense that I'm about to lose any opportunity to control this interaction. "When are we supposed to have started this relationship if I haven't even seen you in months?" he spits.

I consider his assertion. Then, because I can't help myself and I'm a bit of a smartass, I wave my arm over my body and stare at him as if to say, *Whelp, here I am, asshole. Maybe we start it now!*

Draco growls.

His response cuts through my self-righteousness and causes me to assume the appropriate decorum for this conversation.

"If you're from the future and we're married, then why the hell would I send you back in time?" He sneers. "That's where your story falls apart, babe. I'd never do that to my witch," he says with an arrogant smirk. "I'd want her close by."

I force myself not to roll my eyes. "Yes, I know. You're very protective." He shifts his weight as I speak. "And, you don't refer to me as babe by the way. You usually call me, *love*."

I watch Draco freeze in anger and remember myself. I have a mission.

"Look, I'm sorry. I know this is a lot. But I have proof!" I race to the bedside table where I left the wrinkled photograph. "Here, look at this picture of us. It's from our wedding!"

Draco's eyebrows rise, and he gives a derisive laugh while folding his arms and rubbing his forehead. "It's convenient that I *supposedly* surprised you by sending you back in time, yet you *happen* to have picture of our wedding with you. Right?" His sarcasm is palpable

I set the picture back on the table while trying to reign-in my desire to shoot off a nasty retort. "Okay, you're not ready to see that yet. Let's take things one step at a time. Will you tell me what year it is?"

"1997," Draco scoffs in apparent frustration.

I know from reading all the old *Daily Prophets* that the Battle on Hogwarts was in the spring of 1998, which means that Draco sent me back to a year before we supposedly married on Grasmoor. "Fuck," I whisper.

"Okay, Granger." His voice drips with skepticism. "When did you come from?" It's clear that he still doesn't believe me.

"2004 — I think." I'm reeling over the possibility that I might end up being here for seven years.

He glares at me.

"I was 25 years old. I think."

"You *think*?"

I mumble, "Things were a little hazy."

Draco turns and slams the door in his wake.

Three days later, I lay on my back over the bed's covers. I'd love to be sleeping, but instead, I chew my fingernails, feeling on edge. I'm still in my white t-shirt, which I've now had to wash in the sink numerous times, but my legs are bare. My folded shorts are on the chair, and I try to resist the urge to dip my hands below the waistband of my knickers — again! Unfortunately, it doesn't erase the desire from the bond for long. And, it leaves me more amped up.

The need to sate my body's hunger with Draco's lips or hands is driving me mad. I would give anything for Remus's suppressant right now. The pull is excruciating.

I might actually die from this.

My husband's no help. He's waiting in another reality somewhere. Plus, I recognize that my feelings for him are fabricated and complicated. I'm a crazy person who's hot for her captor.

But who can blame me? He has this way of moving his tongue over my — Stop it, Hermione!

This idiotic younger Draco isn't any better. He won't admit the truth or look at my proof, and he hasn't been back to see me in days. I hope he's as miserable as I am!

Just then, the door slams open, and Draco stomps inside. He slumps down on the floor and pulls at his hair.

Speak of the devil. Oh, bugger! I can smell him. It's intoxicating. I could crawl over there and suck on his neck. I know he likes that — or at least older Draco does.

"What did you do to me!?! " Draco is manic. I can relate.

I don't move but force myself to stay frozen, staring at the ceiling. "I didn't do anything. I told you, we're married." Gods, I want him to fuck me!

"You feel this too!?"

"Yes." I huff, then add, "It's not going to get any better the longer we wait."

"Arghh!" He yells in frustration. "Granger, I don't believe you!" He pauses. "But, even if I did, I don't want this!"

I say nothing, but instead, I give a harsh sardonic laugh. He thinks that I wanted this?!

"I'm carrying too much!!" he barks. It's a painful admission.

The statement catches my attention. I start to feel guilty for dropping in on his life. He doesn't deserve this any more than I did.

I sit up and take in his form. He looks beat down. Hot-as-hell but wrecked. "Too much?" I ask, trying to keep my tone as kind as possible.

"Yes, too much! Voldemort is threatening to kill my whole family! He wants me to do increasingly vile things for him. I'm trapped in this situation that I don't want to be in and I cannot be—" he pauses again and then moves his hand back and forth between us. "—whatever this is. I can't be trying so hard to protect my family while I feel like this! I can't help you take down Voldemort or whatever your trying to do. I took the Mark! I won't be able to do anything that you and the Order want me to do. Look, I'm sorry, but it's too dangerous."

I move from the bed to sit crossed-legged in front of him. I need to be closer. What he just admitted is enormous. It's such a relief to know that, at some point, Draco didn't want to support Voldemort's evil regime.

"Draco—"

"Damn it! Cut it out! Since when do you call me that!"

I resist the strong urge to place my hands over his. "We're married in the future. You're feeling this way because we're bound to one another. There are certain things we need to do to remain sane. I know you don't want to follow Voldemort. You're a good man. In fact," I make a rash decision to try and mold him into what I want. It's probably unwise but my mind is too fevered to think straight. "You — you defeat him!"

Oh shit, that one might come back to haunt me.

"What!?" He hurries to stand. I went overboard, and now he's scared. His eyes darken as he threatens, "If you say anything like that again I'll end you, Granger. You're going to get me killed!"

Even though he's dying of want like me, Draco starts to leave.

"You're going to be in this bloody room until you're ready to tell me the truth and reverse whatever spell you placed on me! I hope Potter and Weasley won't miss you too much."

"What? Please stop. I'm sorry!" I grab his hand and feel his warm fingers entwined with mine. It feels glorious to touch him finally.

Draco stares at where our hands meet, and I see how much it impacts him too.

"What month is it?"

"Granger! God damn it! Cut the act! You know it's the end of July!"

Thank the gods! I hoped I only traveled back to a different year, not another month or day. While I thought about my situation over the past several days, I remembered something Remus told me.

"Listen, I think I can prove that I'm telling the truth." Draco sighs and attempts to shake his hands from my hold. "No, listen. Over the next few days I want you to pay attention to these signs. I won't tell you everything, but look out for Voldemort asking to use your father's wand, the number seven, and Alastor Moody. Okay? Just, pay attention. You'll know what I mean."

Three more nights later, I've lost all of my sense of self, and I'm reduced to a melted pool of sparking nerve-endings and shaking limbs. I scratch at my skin to relieve a persistent itch. I can hardly see straight.

Tonight's the night. Tonight is the night. It's the night. It's the 27th. Draco will realize the truth, and he'll come back to heal my unendingeverlovingneedtobefucked!!!!

I've been in this reality now for eight days. I can't stand the sight of the art in this room or the smell of the bed. This former haven of mine can burn in the fiery pits of hell, for all I care. All I want is Draco. I thank the gods that he fucked me before sending me here so that I'm not even worse. But then I bite down on my knuckles to muffle my scream at the thought of my gratitude for being raped!

I'm angry that the tides have turned, and I am now desperate to return to Draco's arms. I seethe over the fact that this Draco doesn't want *me*! And, I damn the fates that I now find myself pursuing *him*! The Draco from the future is an evil Bastard who captured, bound and sentenced me to this horrible existence.

But tonight is the night.

He'll realize tonight.

He'll come back.

Tonight.

Tonight.

Tonight.

Five days later, Draco finally returns. I watch him open the door as I sit in the chair in the corner of the room with my knees pulled up to my chest.

I'm essentially feral at this point.

I gave up trying to wear clothes days ago and now sport only my drenched panties. I track his every move while leaving my head resting on my arms.

His eyes burn with desire as I watch him take in my dewy, naked skin and tight, rosy nipples. He stomps over to where I'm perched and crouches to my eye level.

I hate this man. I hate this man. He better fuck me.

"Voldemort borrowed my father's wand," he says.

I glare at him. We both know that I already know this.

"There were seven Potters "

Yup

"Alastor Moody died."

I can't stand the fact that he still sounds so in control. It's as if he has a willpower of steel. However, I know how much I affect him. I can feel it across our bond. It's electrified at this point.

His voice is deep and anguished when he asks, "How do I make this stop?"

I bite out, "You know what you need to do!"

"Hermione, I'm not going to fuck you."

His words are like nails on a chalkboard.

"Listen," he continues, placating me. "Honestly, you're sensational. You're a magical genius. If there wasn't a war, and my family wasn't ignorant sycophants, I'd love to entertain this delicious idea." Draco rubs the back of his hand down my cheek as he speaks.

"But, this is too dangerous for the both of us. I can't. So, please, tell me how we can solve this problem."

"We can't do anything but appease our bond!"

Draco stands and starts to head towards the door again. I feel how much effort it takes for him to draw away from me. "Marriage bonds don't cause this, Hermione!" he yells. "They cause *some* need but not this!"

That's it. I've had it. I jump out of the chair and meet him by the door. "Draco, stop!" I push him with both hands. The violence feels sinful and right. I'm touching him. It scratches the itch. "I don't know why our bond works like this, you ass. All I know is that it does!"

Draco stops in his tracks, his large frame pulsates with anger and need. He's fighting our bond with every fiber of his being.

I push him again. "Stop being so stubborn!"

I pour all my pent-up rage at his tall frame.

I'm furious thinking about all the times I wished this man held restraint, and he didn't! Where was this caution when he bound me to him? Where was this self-control when he kept me locked away for years, fucking the life out of me? Where was this discipline when he dragged me in front of his Master and took me in front of all those pigs?

"Arghh!" I rear back to push him one more time.

Draco spins around. He locks my wrist in a vice-like grip and slams my back into the door as he presses against me — chest heaving.

I feel him harden as his eyes skate over my naked breasts. He has me pinned to the wall, and my body feels exquisite relief.

This is where I want to be, and it's obvious that Draco wants me caged under his arms as well.

"Do not provoke me, witch!" His voice is deadly. I can tell that he's fighting to hold it together. He slides his hand up to my scalp and grabs a fistful of my curls.

I attempt to push at his heavy chest again because I want this craziness to be over.

"I'll provoke you all I want!" I cry out as I feel his muscles tense. The air stills as I sense him warring with himself.

I roll my hips, chasing the pressure that I need from his hard length. The movement feels like ecstasy. I'm lost to the sensation as I climb up his body, wrap my legs around his middle, and push my chest out to drag along his torso. I drop my face to his neck, lick over his skin, and

suck gently on his pulse point before crooning, "I'm sorry, just please, Draco. I know how stressed you are. Let me be your release. I need to feel you inside me."

It feels as though I set fire to our relationship's powder keg. Draco's eyes darken. He groans his approval and tightens his hold on my curls.

Then slams his lips to mine.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, Draco is of age in this story (by wizarding standards) I aged him up a bit because I'm not interested in underage content. HOWEVER, the next several chapters are about the two of them navigating the relationship while Hermione is older and he is younger. This is your notice that if you aren't comfortable with that dynamic, now is the time to bail.

Chapter 12: London

Chapter Summary

If you wake up one day and don't feel the same
Would you still smile when the feeling fades?
Look to the side when I'm saying your name
Say it's all fine, baby; lie to my face
Who am I to make you stay?
Baby, let me down easy
If you wake up one day and don't feel the same
Will you? Will you?
- Let Me Down Easy (Lie), Why Don't We

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Draco captures my mouth, sliding his tongue between my parted lips. He stakes his claim over my body as if to leave no question about who is in charge. I purr in satisfaction, feeling the door's hard wood at my back. His hand tightens at the base of my neck as he presses his broad frame tighter against my throbbing chest. Now that he finally gave himself the permission we both wanted, he consumes me. The warm room hums as our bodies call to each other. It's a rhythm that spans time and realities.

I feel molten, like a deep well of fire bubbles below the surface of my skin, waiting to decimate everything in its path as I boil over. Draco's everywhere. He tilts my head and imprints his torrid lips on my neck, collarbone, and jaw. I hear him growl his approval as I match his intensity. I need this. I devour him and thank the gods that I finally feel some relief from my crippling thirst. When my taut nipples brush against his soft shirt, I nearly come.

There's a momentary pause as I feel Draco shift to lean his shoulder into me. I whine in protest as he uses his right hand to grab the back of his shirt and pull it over his head. Then his rugged, muscular torso meets my plump breasts, and the floor drops beneath me. I'm lost to the sheer pleasure of our naked bodies.

As I mewl, Draco spins us around and stomps through the room before throwing me onto the bed. The move knocks the air out of me as I land, but I right myself to meet him at the edge of the mattress and continue where we started.

I take in his smooth pale skin, broad shoulders, and strong arms as his eyes lick over my skin. For a brief moment, I worry that he might change his mind as he pauses to capture every detail of my petite frame. But, a second later, I hear a deep groan of approval as he reaches to loosen his belt.

I don't want to wait for him to rip my panties off of me, so I slide them down as I hear the metal clink. I wiggle my hips and shimmy the fabric down before letting them drop on the floor. When I do, the cool air brushes my soaked pussy, making me shiver with anticipation.

The intensity in Draco's eyes is almost scary as I await his advance. I lean on my elbows and begin to crawl back onto the bed further but stop when I feel Draco's firm hand clamp around my ankle as he drags me back.

"Stay put."

My mind goes numb as Draco parts my wet folds and brushes his thumb through my sex, over my fat, throbbing clit. His eyes draw my gaze, and I'm locked into the pull of his command as he raises an arrogant eyebrow and circles my tender flesh. The motion causes me to pull in a tight breath and freeze in the shock of pleasure.

Draco continues playing with me, pulling out my desire as I writhe beneath him. As he does, I notice through the fog of my rapture that his pants hang low on his hips.

"Tell me what you like, witch," he demands. His voice is like sin.

What a ridiculous question; Draco knows every inch of me and what I prefer. He knows when to be gentle and kind and when to fuck me hard. He even knows how to make me enjoy terrifying moments, like when he showed up at the cave.

Then it hits me. I pause for a moment remembering that this Draco doesn't know my body inside and out.

Even though I've been under his command countless times, this scene is new for him. He's looking at my body for the first time and demanding to know what makes me tick.

I smile, enjoying that the tides have turned and now I hold the power. I remember how I felt when I woke up in the Manor, knowing he had intimate knowledge of my body.

I run my hand over his tense arm and rise to my knees on the bed while keeping his fingers between my legs.

"I like cumming on your hand as I watch your cock strain to sink into me," I whisper in his ear.

Days ago, I decided to think about the consequences later. First, I need to clear my mind from the delirium of incessant arousal.

Draco growls again as he pushes me back down to lean over me, continuing to circle my tingling bundle of nerve endings. My breath catches in my throat as I feel his smooth thumb rub against me again and again. His touch is heaven. My ears start to ring, and my body freezes as the silky feel of his unhurried hand draws me closer to the edge. Draco watches me like a hawk as he works to pull the orgasm from me. Time stands still as I hyper-focus on my physical needs. I'm finally going to feel relief; oh, Godric, I need this. I climb higher and higher, feeling the energy pooling in my lower abdomen, about to break free. Then two more swipes of delicious fire over my skin, and I seize with an intense release. I grasp his muscular forearm and turn my head to moan into the mattress. It's indescribable how good it feels to pulse against his thumb. I can't breathe. I hold out for the crest of the orgasm to pass but instead, wave after wave engulfs me.

His hand can do what mine couldn't, no matter how hard I tried over the past several days. My full breasts bounce as I squirm underneath him, and then the next thing I know, Draco pulls my razor-sharp nipple into his mouth and sucks on it with his velvet tongue. The added sensation causes me to shake and whine.

"Oh, fuck, Draco! Oh fuck, oh fuck!"

Before I even come down from my high, Draco fists his stiff cock and pulls it out to rub his blunt head between my folds. Our chests are heaving in tandem, and we lock eyes again as he pushes into me.

I feel every inch of Draco's advance as he fills me to the hilt. After all these years, I still squirm with the perfect pinch between pain and pleasure. He's enormous, but my body was made to take him. I know he'll fit. He trained me to take him. Draco holds me for a second, catching his breath, and I roll my hips to encourage him further. It's all the invitation he needs. He pulls out again and slams into me, then sets a grueling pace, chasing his desire.

For the past two weeks, I've sat in this room, inching closer and closer to madness as I wait for Draco to fuck me. I shudder as I imagine how hard he must have been trying to avoid the truth of our situation. How much he must have tugged at his raging cock to sate his growing need, only to find it rock hard again in a few minutes. He didn't know the bliss that is our bodies coupling in a mind-blowing union.

All the while, I knew what it was like to feel our cores entwined. Draco had no clue how intense our connection was until now.

My breath starts to shudder as I feel myself building toward another explosive climax. Draco's body is angled just right to provide the pressure I need on my clit. He ruts into me with blinding passion, and I lose myself in the thoughts of touch, taste, and feel. I grab his large hand and drape it over my throat in an effort to feel wholly under his control. It's the only way I know how to relate to this man — by submission. Years of deep and complicated history taught me that I need to feel his power over me. I need to wield it — to harness it. I need to say when he can and cannot throw me around.

Draco's eyes blow wide at my daring. I feel him harden within me — I didn't even know he could become more aroused. His pace quickens as he bends his head to regard my supple skin and wide legs. I watch his gaze drop to where his length thrusts into my tight cunt, forcing my walls to open. I feel his hands shake to put more pressure on my throat. He wants to consume me as much as I want to be consumed.

I mewl in satisfaction as his hulking figure over me starts to slow to a staccato. He slams into me, inches out, pumps back and forth with a shallow slide of his hips, and then splits me

again before shattering.

Draco's warm seed gushes into my channel as he groans in pleasure. He rolls his hips and pumps out as much as he can give. The moment causes me to plummet headfirst into a second white-hot eruption. It's so good it almost hurts.

After a few more beautiful seconds of connection, the veil begins to crack. I watch as Draco comes back to his senses and closes his eyes for a breath in resignation. He pulls out, and I feel his spend drip from my sex, along my leg, and unto the bed. The room cools, and I lay on my back, noticing the crumpled sheets, my clothes draping this way and that on the armchair, and several books stacked on the windowsill.

The moment of passion is over, and we're once again two strangers. But now we breathe together with our hot, naked bodies wrapped around each other.

I hear Draco clear his throat as he stands and bends to pull his pants on after casting a contraceptive charm on me and a Tergeo on himself.

"Well, I'll give it to you, Granger —," he pauses to shake out his fist, staring at the hand that was just wrapped around my throat. "You're an especially hot fuck."

The quiet of the room thrums in my head as I realize what I just initiated. I don't know how to reconcile all the complex emotions that war through my mind. Now that we sated the bond, the bloom of clarity feels refreshing. But I'm left to consider the implications.

"Thanks," I murmur while pulling the covers up to my chest.

Draco runs his fingers through his hair. He slides his feet into his boots, looking as if he wants to bolt. I watch him and worry that he's about to leave me here again. However, I don't have to worry for long. He turns and holds a hand out to me.

"Come on," he demands.

"W-where are we going?" I ask. Then I shake my head and dip my shoulders because I'm frustrated with myself for sounding so weak. I'm hardwired to obey his commands and cower from him. The past year did a number on me — first trusting him wholeheartedly and then feeling that security shatter.

"You can't stay here any longer. I'm taking you to my room to clean up and gather some things. Then you need to get the hell out of this bloody house." He pauses. "Like I said, it's too dangerous."

My stupid heart leaps thinking that this younger Draco might have turned a corner. Maybe he cares for me now, even a little bit. Despite myself, a part of me still wants the relationship I thought I had. Perhaps his concern is the beginning of changing my future circumstances.

But then he continues, sounding bitter.

"I can't be caught shagging an Order member."

His words are like a knife to my chest. His sheer indifference toward me feels wrong. It causes me to flush with resentment and anger. Why do I even care what this asshole thinks of me?

"Right."

I feel my body tense, and irritation runs up my spine. I start to slide off the bed and realize how much of a mess I am. I refuse to let Draco humiliate me any further. So, I shoot him a

look that could kill, snapping, "I'm not going anywhere until you clean me up." I fold my arms and feel my jaw tighten. "I don't have a wand. Remember."

Draco's eyes soften. He stares at the floor and scratches the back of his neck as he casts the nonverbal spell. Satisfied, I crawl out of bed and walk to the armchair to pull my white shirt back over my head and jean shorts up my legs. I bend to grab my panties and bra off the floor to tuck them into my pocket. I'll need to clean them before I put them back on. I continue to throw daggers in Draco's direction, and luckily he has the sense to avert his eyes and offer me some privacy.

When I finish, I pull my hair back, wrapping it around my hand several times and tying it into a knot at the top of my head. Then I summon all the grace I can muster and meet Draco on the other side of the bed.

"We'll Apparate downstairs so we don't run the risk of being seen," he says while holding out his hand again.

I don't respond, but I place my palm against him, feeling the slight tingle of our bonds singing. Draco spins, and I'm back in my bedroom the next thing I know. Despite all that's happened, returning to this space feels comforting. It was my refuge for so long. Everything looks the same, except there aren't any traces of me. A quick sideways glance into the walk-in closet tells me that it doesn't house any of my clothes. That would be too easy.

"You can shower first if you like." Draco's low voice draws my attention back to where he stands, watching me take everything in. "Just make it quick. The bathroom is that door over there —"

"I know where it is," I reply, stomping towards the ensuite. "I need new clothes. Tell Millie to bring me something."

"I can't do that Hermione."

His response stops me in my tracks. I turn to face him and notice that he looks conflicted.

"The other elves might notice, and it could get back to my parents or Voldemort," he explains.

I let out a deep sigh. It's weird to hear Draco mention his parents. Remus told me about them. He also noted that Voldemort lived in Malfoy Manor for a time, but my Draco never mentioned them.

The older Draco, Hermione! Neither of them is mine.

I scold myself for the slip.

"I'll do my best to transfigure something of mine to fit you," he offers instead.

"Fine. Whatever!" I sneer before I turn to start back towards the shower again.

"You're barmy! You know that?!" Draco barks. He's mad all of a sudden. "Don't beg to take my cock and then treat me like I'm a jerk!"

I don't turn around, but my shoulders drop as I take a few more steps and close the bathroom door with a click.

I spend a long time in the shower — where the tile is blue, just like I said! I need some time to think. I have so many competing thoughts, and I don't know what to make out of them. I try to compile what I know and what my next course of action should be. I'm at the mercy of this younger man until I can find a wand or figure out a way back to my time. I need to stay with him, or I'll be a wreck again in another few days.

I squeeze some shampoo from the luxury bottles on the shower shelf. Then, as I lather the sweet-smelling stuff into my hands and rub it through my locks, I hear the door open. I'm facing the wall, but I lean over my shoulder to see what's happening.

"I'm not looking. I'm just grabbing your clothes," Draco grunts. "I want to try something."

I turn back around and pretend he's not there. I'm not sure what he's up to, but I'll deal with that later. The water runs over my face and back, rinsing the bubbles from my hair as I continue to think. I need to stay focused on my mission, I remind myself. It's a long shot, but trying to change my future by convincing this Draco to be a better person still seems like a decent attempt to do something positive with my forced trip through time. I take a deep breath and puff out my cheeks, blowing the air out the side of my mouth.

Alright, so first, I'll need to convince him to let me stay, and then I can try to chip away at his distaste for me. Sure, all I need to do is allow my future rapist to reject me repeatedly. That's not going to fuck up my self-esteem.

I cut off the water and grab a fluffy towel when clean and refreshed. I wrap it around myself and walk back into the bedroom, slapping my wet feet on the cold tile.

Draco stands by the bed, working on something. He turns around when he hears my approach, and I see his eyes widen as he takes in my appearance.

I narrow my eyes in return and roll my shoulders back, then raise my chin.

"I was able to enlist Millie's help somewhat," he offers when he has a moment to collect himself. "I had her come up here and launder your clothes."

That's thoughtful, I guess. "Thank you."

He shifts, and I glimpse what else is resting on the mattress. There's a large pile of clothing — several identical shirts and shorts of various colors, plus some other items.

"I duplicated what you already had and did my best to transfigure them into different colors to give you some variety." He pauses to take in my expression, and he continues when he catches the softening of my brows. "I also pulled out some of my jumpers in case you get cold."

Gods bless him; at least he's trying. I pull myself together and walk to meet him; then, I grab an outfit from the stack. I shimmy some knickers up my legs, taking care not to show too much skin, and pull on some navy blue shorts next. It feels awkward to dress in front of a man who just had his mouth all over my skin but now doesn't care for my company.

Draco watches me with an expression I can't quite place. He doesn't turn away, but he scowls in my direction. I drum up some courage and drop the towel. The cool air skates over me, and I feel my nipples harden before sliding one of the bras on and pulling a gray shirt over my head. I notice the heat in his gaze at my nakedness and find a certain satisfaction in reminding myself that he isn't utterly indifferent to me.

When dressed, I wait for a beat to double-check that this is the course of action I want to take. Then, I take a deep breath and slide my hand down Draco's arm to entwine our fingers.

"I'm sorry that I got so angry," I offer as Draco stares at our hands in mild shock. He gives a slight shake of his head and then meets my gaze. "It's just hard. I miss you so much." I see confusion cross his face, so I whisper, "We are so in love in the future." Ha! I hope I'm coming off as believable. Sure, you and I are a happy little couple in the future. "It's hard to accept that you're not pleased I'm here."

Draco's voice rumbles as he admits, "Hermione, this is a lot. I just allowed myself to believe that you might actually be telling the truth. I spent the past week debating whether to turn you over to Voldemort and win favor for my family." He pauses, and I let that sink in for a moment. I never considered that scenario. Shit.

"I'm not your husband. You and I aren't even friends."

And, there you have it, folks—rejection numero uno.

I start to pull my hand away, but he grabs ahold of me tighter. "But, I'm not, *not* pleased that you're here," he says with a self-deprecating smirk. "I mean, like I said, that was pretty spectacular."

I'll take what I can get, I guess. "Okay, okay," I say, pushing at Draco's chest. "I know I'm good in the sack." I smile as he begins to look incredulous.

"I mean, I was there too, witch!"

The moment feels light. It's nice to see this dour man look less severe. I start to respond, but then Millie pops into the room.

"Master, they is returning." She's terrified.

The moment evaporates as quickly as it started. Draco's expression turns stony again, and he begins to bark orders as he levitates the clothes and several other objects into a bag. There's a flurry of commotion. Then, once he packs, he hands me the backpack.

"You need to get out of here."

Fear laces up my arms. "But, Draco —!" I cry. "The desire is just going to start back up again in a few days. I need to stay with you. Or at least near you. And I don't have a wand!"

"I know that! I'm going with you," he hisses. "Now give me your goddamn hand!"

We spin again, and I recognize the pull of Apparition. However, this time it feels different. Instead of an effortless twist through the air, it feels like we are slugging through water where the current pushes us backward. When we finally arrive, Draco is out of breath. I watch him bend at the waist and drag air through his lungs while I hear cars honking and the sounds of people passing by outside.

"What the hell just happened?" I blurt out.

Draco doesn't respond at first. I dart my eyes around the space to take in where we landed. It's a posh downtown condo. The place is lush. There are floor-to-ceiling windows on all sides of

the entry room. They overlook a large park. In front of me is the elegant living room with low couches facing one another. They sit near a two-story fireplace of stunning marble with tasteful veining that separates the vast, open space from the formal dining area. The massive dining table is in the center of the second room, with a wall of wine bottles to one side and another bank of windows straight ahead.

"Fuck!" Draco groans as he pulls up to his full height again. "We Apparated out of the Manor." His response is deadpan.

"Yes, I recognized as much," I say, shifting my weight to one side and crossing my arms. "Why did it feel so weird. And, what was the hurry?" I start to demand answers. I throw my arm out, indicating the condo. "And, where the hell did we land?"

Draco grabs the backpack up from the floor and starts down the hall. I follow as he begins to climb a sweeping staircase.

"We travelled to London," he grumps without turning around to address me. "It felt weird because I had to ruddy side-along a grown-ass witch 146 miles to avoid using the Floo-network." As he stomps up the steps, he throws out his hand in exasperation. "Which is heavily monitored now for Order activity."

Right. That makes sense.

"We left in a hurry because Voldemort and his followers were headed back to the Manor." He stops and spins around. I nearly run into him. "This is my home." His glare slices through me. "As you should know."

"Riiight. Yeah, you uh, had a place when we first got together, but you uh, sold it." Draco scours my expression, looking skeptical. "I always thought it was odd that you, um, lived on your own when you were so young. It's extravagant, no? I, uh, never saw it before." I finish, stumbling over the lie. Draco narrows his eyes, then turns and storms up the steps again.

"I'm of age."

I race to follow him again.

"Why would I want to live with my parents forever?"

When we get to the top of the steps, there's a hallway and then a bedroom that spans almost the entire second level. I see a glass wall looking down over the great room and the same huge windows as below. I watch Draco chuck the bag onto the king-sized bed and continue toward the marble-clad ensuite.

"I'm taking a shower. You can get your stuff out of the bag and go set up in the guest room downstairs."

We spend the rest of the evening milling around the apartment, avoiding each other. At dinnertime, I smell food wafting down the hall to my room as I stare out the window. I make my way to the dining room and find Draco seated with a correspondence lying out in front of him as he eats. When I enter, he lifts his eyes, sighs, and silently motions toward the empty place across from him. He continues reading as I tuck into the roasted lamb and potatoes. I give a hum of approval from the taste of savory dill and butter. I haven't eaten this well in a long time. I miss Millie's cooking. This sure beats the plain bread and cheese she's been sending me in secret. A large glass of red wine is in front of me, so I take a few sips to avoid the awkwardness.

Finally, Draco raises his eyes to mine and says, "I sell this place?"

Shit.

I take a big bite of a warm dinner roll. "Mmhm."

"Why would I sell anything? I don't need the money."

He stares, so I take another swig of wine to wash down the lump in my throat.

"You said something about getting an offer you couldn't refuse. I don't know." I try to change the subject. "What are you reading?"

Draco's brows lower as he folds the parchment and stuffs it into his robe. "Where are you right now?"

"Huh?"

"I mean where is the younger you hiding?" he asks, looking predatory.

Bugger! I'm unsure what he wants to do with this information, but I can't answer either way. I should've realized he would be curious. I race to think up a plausible excuse for my memory gaps. Remus didn't mention where I was on the run. He just said I was gone for a year with Harry and Ron.

"Look, I know this is going to be frustrating, but I can't tell you what happens in the future."

"You already did! You told me about Moody."

I interrupt. "—Yes! But, I didn't tell you what was going to happen. I just told you to watch out for clues and I shouldn't have even done that! Messing with time is dangerous."

"No shit!" His voice drips with sarcasm.

I ignore him and continue with my excuse. I need him to think there is some bright, happy future I'm trying to protect. "Since you uh, defeat—."

Draco's expression turns icy.

I change course so as not to antagonize him. Draco has made it clear he doesn't want to hear anything about Voldemort's supposed downfall. I get it. He probably feels he has no option but to do what the sick dictator says. The idea of standing up to him must be terrifying. "I just don't want to risk changing the future," I lie. The future can go to hell!

After Draco finishes eating, he stands and folds his napkin. He leaves it by his plate and offers a curt, "Well, goodnight."

I finish eating, listening to the sounds of the air conditioning turning on and the elevator dinging out in the hall. I watch the lights blink in the buildings around London's skyline and eventually return to my room. There's a bookshelf in the great room, so I choose a novel and try to escape into a story to forget everything that swirls around me.

When I tire, I crawl into the soft queen-sized bed and push aside what seems like ten thousand pillows. I make space for myself amid the comfy bedding and try to pass out.

However, sleep doesn't find me.

Hours later, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, thinking about how warm and comforting it is in Draco's arms. The bond isn't screaming out with need yet, but regardless, I still feel the constant draw to be near him. I shift my legs back and forth beneath the covers, and flop from side to side smacking and pulling at the blanket. Another thirty minutes pass before I finally flip unto my back and splay my arms and legs out, puffing out a deep breath of frustration.

I need to be closer to Draco to be able to fall asleep. When I admit that, I resign myself to curling up in the hall outside his room. Maybe that will be enough. I grab a pillow from the stack and drag it behind me as I start up the steps. I tip-toe, not wanting to disturb him. However, as I reach his door, it flies open.

An exhausted-looking Draco towers over me in the darkness. He scowls while holding on to the doorframe but softens when he catches me in front of him.

Everything around us stills.

We each take a few deep breaths before Draco brushes my hair over my shoulder and bends to take the pillow from my hand. He opens the door wider, placing his palm on my lower back and directing me to his bed. I shiver as I feel him moving behind me. When we reach his tall mattress, I crawl in and then turn over, pleading with my eyes all the things I cannot say. The worst part is that I'm not even putting on a show. I need him right now. Draco stretches out beside me. As he does, he lifts his chin, motioning for me to lay back, then I feel his large frame wrap around my back as he drapes one arm over my stomach and pulls the covers up. Finally comfortable, we both nod off.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone curious, this is what I am using as inspiration for Draco's penthouse.
<https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/14/london-most-expensive-penthouse-is-a-247-million-whisper-listing.html>

Chapter 13: Push and Pull

Chapter Summary

Say something, I'm giving up on you
I'll be the one, if you want me to
Anywhere, I would've followed you
Say something, I'm giving up on you
-Say Something, Great Big World & Christina Aguilera

"Thanks, Millie," I offer as she hands me a cup of tea. Almost five months have passed since Draco first brought me to London, and a lot has happened, even though I've remained mostly glued to this penthouse.

"You is very welcome, Mrs." Mille says with a smile.

The morning after Draco first brought me here, I woke to his warm body wrapped around me and his stiff shaft nudging my backside. I felt flushed and gently rolled my hips as I stretched and yawned. Our bodies called out to one another even in sleep. When I checked to see if he was awake, I caught a glimpse of my husband looking peaceful and calm in a sound sleep. He was the perfect picture of the man I thought I married.

Feeling my gaze, Draco awoke. He shifted to his back and brushed his hair out of his eyes, displaying his strong muscles while he moved. Next, I saw a couple of emotions cross his features. His mouth tightened at first, and he set his jaw. It looked like he was still warring with himself for allowing me into his bed. However, then he turned to me, relaxing his brow and giving himself over to the fact that we were already in bed together — there wasn't much point in making a deal about it. That was the moment that I saw the heat enter his expression again.

One fevered look from me was all it took for him to run his fingers along the hem of my shirt before pulling it up to expose my breast and then bending to run his tongue over my nipple.

After he fucked me, Draco turned surly again. He stomped into the shower, and I took the hint to head back downstairs and do the same. Later, we sat together over a quiet, chilly breakfast before Draco pulled on a robe and headed for the fireplace.

"Where are you going?" I asked from my spot on the couch. I set my book down and curled my feet under me, pulling at the sleeves of my jumper. Well, Draco's jumper. It was made from soft wool and dyed green and was huge on me — but heavenly.

"Back to the Manor." He straightened his outfit as he spoke. "I need to get my orders for the day and make sure no one caught on to any of this." He didn't look at me as he spoke.

"Okay," I mumbled, feeling disappointed. I preferred company during the days. Otherwise, it was easy to become bored and anxious. "Will you be back tonight?"

"Probably," he said, throwing some powder into the hearth and stepping into the flames.

Thirty anxious minutes later, there was a *Pop!* in the kitchen. When I walked to investigate, I found Millie standing there with a small fabric bag.

"Master told me that I work here now," she said by way of an explanation. "He says that I'm done working at the Manor and that my job now is to tend to you, Mrs."

She was a welcome surprise.

Millie and I soon found a pleasant rhythm. She stayed out of sight until Draco left each morning, and then we spent the day cooking, chatting, or doing some household project. Millie didn't like me to help her clean, but she tolerated my assistance with other tasks when I pleaded with her because I needed something to do.

I was so grateful for her company that I found myself searching for ways to thank her. Being together during the days felt like the good old times — before I knew how perverse my life was.

One day I ventured down to the street and found a bakery on the first floor. I chatted with the friendly Muggle clerk who recommended their Bonofee pie. He was right; Millie loved the sweet treat. She looked ashamed to take it from me at first, but when I insisted, her ears wiggled with delight. Every few days after that, I went to the bakery to order a cup of tea. Since it was located within the building, I always told the clerk — whom I found out later was named Callum— to charge the purchase to the penthouse.

It felt empowering to visit the shop. Draco didn't set wards on the penthouse door, so I reasoned that it was okay to venture outside. But I also never told him what I was doing. He had too much money to bother with a few minor charges here and there, so we never discussed my trips into Muggle London.

Each night Draco returned to have dinner with me before guiding me upstairs. On the nights when he came back late, he would find me in my room and carry me up to the main suite. He never took me in my room. I asked him about it once, but he only mentioned that he wanted me to have some space of my own.

I learned several things the longer I stayed. Draco told me about how he had been at the Manor for an execution the day I arrived in 1997. Voldemort had brutally killed one of our former Hogwarts teachers, Charity Burbage. It happened before Draco's eyes and caused him to escape to the third floor at the first opportunity. He was traumatized by the event and needed to clear his head, so he found an empty room to catch his breath but found me instead.

"Let's just say it wasn't the recuperation that I needed," Draco said in a deadpan voice at breakfast one day. He sipped his tea while telling me what drew him to our introduction that day.

I also learned Draco kept me a secret from Voldemort and his family by warding the door and only returning when the house was empty.

One night during dinner, when Draco was keen to be the most amenable, I asked him if he could get me a wand.

"Draco?" I said while setting down my fork. I was careful to choose the perfect moment for my request. He was always in a better mood before he fucked me each night. Afterward, he tended to become quiet and grumpy.

"Yes," he drawled.

"I've been in 1997 for a month now, and I'm finding it hard not to use my magic." I watched as his body tensed in anticipation of where I was heading. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate everything you're doing to keep me safe, but is there any way you could find me a wand?"

I felt the air tense between us as Draco sipped his Firewhiskey.

"That's impossible. Sorry."

My shoulders sagged, and I let out a disappointed sigh.

"All of the British wandmakers are dead or in hiding. There isn't anyone to make one for you."

I shifted, feeling irritation run up my neck. I knew Draco was lying to me.

I implored, "I would be happy to have a used wand. I'm sure there are some around. You could find one."

"Wand acquisition is very tricky right now." Draco cut me off. "The Ministry is starting to hold trials and procuring a wand for an unregistered witch or wizard is impossible. Sorry."

I heard the ticking of the clock in the hallway. We were at an impasse again. One built on lies and half-truths.

I hated not having a wand and the risk that it put me in. Draco and I maintained a somewhat amicable arrangement up until that point. We weren't arguing as much, and he no longer refused to sate our bond. But he wasn't warming up to the idea of our supposed love affair yet, regardless of how hard I tried to spin that web.

His lie stung. I didn't think through my response before snapping, "Oh, so your parents don't have Ollivander locked in their basement!?"

Remus told me the wandmaker was held there while Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and I were on the run.

At that, Draco went still. He narrowed his eyes and looked predatory, dropping his careful façade.

"I forget my *wife* is privy to so much information." His voice dripped with condescension. "Sorry, love, but what did you expect? Did you think I could show up for a war council meeting and excuse myself to go ask the Dark Lord's captive to make a wand for an Order member?!"

I folded my arms. "I bet you could figure out something if you tried."

"That's enough. I'm not entertaining this idea any further. I can assist you with any magical needs when I'm home. And Millie is here when I'm away."

That night our coupling was rough again as we took out our pent-up aggression on each other's bodies. There was something about both attempting to claw at him and being restrained by him as he took me that filled some empty void. If he wasn't even going to pretend to care about me, I needed to know our intimacy wasn't pretending to be anything more than two angry people forced to fuck one another.

Several days of cool interactions passed before I gave up on obtaining a wand for the time being. I instead got back to work trying to mold Draco into the man I wanted him to become, reasoning that those actions might lead to a wand in the future.

A few nights later, I convinced Draco to sit with me by the fire before heading to bed. I imagine he said yes because the irritation between us was grating on our bond. It felt unnatural. He chose an armchair across from me, but after a quiet, tense moment, he widened his legs and lifted his chin, indicating that he wanted me to join him in his lap.

"H—how was your day?" I asked to encourage him to talk but then cringed at my lame attempt.

"Fine," he grumped while shifting his weight in his chair in discomfort. Of course, he had a rotten day. He's a soldier in an evil war.

I tried a new tactic.

"Draco, I know this isn't easy—" the words flowed out of my mouth as an echo of what the future Draco said to me several times. "—but, thank you for—" I paused, then shrugged my shoulders and added in self-deprecation, "—for putting up with me."

My vulnerability worked. Draco huffed a laugh and rubbed his hand over my arm but then caught himself and drew it back.

"Actually, it turns out you're fairly easy," he said with a smile.

I couldn't tell if he meant to joke, so I remained quiet.

Then he stilled and groaned, "It's the rest of my life that's a mess."

His comment caused my ears to perk up. It was another example of him alluding to his unhappiness with his role in Voldemort's regime.

I didn't take the bait this time, though. Instead, I placed my hand in Draco's and whispered. "I know. I'm sorry you're so stuck right now."

He bent his neck to take in my expression. I saw him searching for any hint of insincerity. Gooseflesh tingled over my skin as I willed myself to look as kind and truthful as possible.

Though when examining my thoughts, I realized the statement was true. I did have compassion for Draco's circumstances. I saw how much his days took out of him — the dark circles under his eyes, the way his hands shook before he entered the flames each day. It was heartbreaking. This Draco didn't want to support Voldemort. This Draco wasn't a rapist. He was just a terrified man caught in an untenable situation.

Taking advantage of the positive direction of our conversation, I said, "Oh, I found something today."

"What's that?"

"You have a music room?"

I stumbled upon the door earlier that day. It was down the back hall; I always assumed it was a closet. But, when Millie asked me to look for a new tablecloth, I opened the door to see a low couch, a tall bookshelf, and a music stand stationed in the middle of the room.

"I do."

He didn't elaborate.

"What do you play?"

He sighed, then answered, "My parents insisted that I learn multiple instruments. Violin was my preference."

I jumped to respond, almost spilling the beans about my own skills, but then caught myself. I realized that his admission presented an opportunity.

"Would you teach me?"

Draco's eyes lowered, and he cocked his head again. "Really?"

"Practicing would give me something to do while you're away."

"Okay, witch," he offered, then guided my head to his shoulder, indicating it was time to stop talking. We spent the rest of the evening in silence, holding one another.

The next day, Draco didn't leave for the Manor. He said something about Voldemort being away as he walked me down the hall. Then, we spent the remainder of the morning making music together. The trickiest part was pretending like I didn't already know how to play.

My fingers were primed to land on the strings with perfect form. They begged to sway with vibrato, but I needed to hold back instead.

"Is this the one?"

"No. That's the A string. I want you to start on the E string," Draco said, trying not to look frustrated.

" *This* one?"

He ran his hand across his forehead. "No, for the love of Salazar, Hermione it's this one!" He picked up my finger and placed it on the lowest string. "How can you be this dense? Didn't you get an O on like all of your O.W.Ls? Merlin!"

I had no idea if that was true or not. It wasn't one of the tidbits that Remus shared. I liked the idea of being that smart, though. Regardless, seeing Draco come undone over teaching me how to play Twinkle Twinkle was hilarious.

When we finished and headed to lunch, Draco left me with homework. "Practice the various rhythms and the G scale before we do this again."

After lunch, I convinced him to play for me, and I was surprised that he was just as skilled as me. He had never played for me before, in this time or the future. Past? Whatever.

It was a pleasant afternoon. Draco looked relaxed, even kind at times. We worked together and didn't talk about time travel, wars, or bonds. As I drifted off to sleep that night with Draco's naked body wrapped around mine, my mind was a buzz.

I tried to determine when I first learned to play. If it was as a child, then it made sense that I played so well. But I wondered whether *this* was the moment I learned. What if time was cyclical, and I had been in this scene before? What if I had experienced this lesson an infinite amount of times as I grew up, ended up with Draco in the future, came back to the past, then back to the future again? It hurt to think about.

Luckily, I rolled over and grazed the stony plain of my bonded partner's stomach. He moaned and woke up hungry for another round of intimacy, and by the time we finished, I passed out.

After that day, I spent hours practicing. When Draco was home, I pretended to struggle along through the basics, but when he was gone for the day, I let my fingers fly over the strings to soothe my soul. I sometimes noticed Millie's curious glances when I put away the instrument and left the room for the day. She caught on to the lie but never said anything.

It felt like Draco, and I were making strides toward becoming closer to one another. However, Draco always took two steps forward and one step back. Sitting before the fire became a nighttime routine, as did practicing music together. Things were moving along so well that I started to think that my plan might be working and that he might develop genuine feelings for me after all. I still didn't know how that made me feel, but I hoped that it meant I wouldn't experience so much abuse in the future.

Unfortunately, one afternoon, while playing violin together, we started to laugh. I pretended once again to be a little dense, and in his incredulity, Draco bent down and placed a tender kiss on my lips.

"Merlin's balls! I'm not sure you're ever going to get this!" He joked, "But, I have to admit. It's nice besting you in something for once." Then it happened. He kissed me. His lips were soft as his hand cupped my face. I tasted legitimate affection, not the lust-induced fabrication the bond caused us to experience, but real tenderness.

It took my breath away.

I felt so many emotions in the few seconds it took us to draw apart from one another. My shoulders sang with joy because I felt victorious for making headway with my plan. I was breaking down his tough exterior. My lower abdomen tingled with excitement for what might follow after the kiss. My head filled with complex thoughts about what it meant to enjoy a real kiss from the man who would treat me so horribly in the future. But most of all, my heart ached with the desperate desire to stay forever in his embrace.

Then he pulled away. "Fuuuck," he hummed. Then the realization of what just happened hit him. "Fuck!" He ran his hands through his hair, and his eyes blew wide with anxiety. He paced around the small room, then stormed out of the door.

"Draco, wait!" I called after him.

"Leave me alone, Hermione! Damn it!"

He didn't come home for days. When he did, we were both too sex-crazed to talk. He returned one night, pulled me up from the couch by the back of my neck, and slammed me against the window. I mewled in satisfaction as he thrust up my skirt, ripped off my panties, and plunged into my channel. My mind was swirling over how hot it felt to be taken where all the world could see. He spilled into me while I screamed and bit down on his shoulder to stifle my own release. Then, he righted himself and stomped up the stairs to his suite. I heard the door crash shut. He was cold with me the following day, but he ate breakfast before leaving.

Variations of the same cycle happened several times over the months. We'd inch closer to one another. Then, Draco would let himself free and kiss me or make love to me, and next, he would punish himself for days.

One time, when his rejection felt especially brutal, I sank into a terrible depression. I wallowed over the fact that I was still waiting around in the purgatory of another time period while under the idiotic assumption that I could do anything to break through to this horrible, frustrating man I was bound to.

I spent hours on the first floor of the building, sitting in front of the bakery windows with a cup of hot tea in my hands, dreaming about walking away to live a simple life with the Muggles.

That's when Collum approached me.

"Hey," he said, startling me from my thoughts one day. "Is everything okay? You look down."

He stood over me with a jacket on, looking like he was about to leave. "Oh, hi," I said, drying my eyes on my sleeve. "I'm fine. Thanks for asking," I lied. "Are you — uh — off for the night?"

"Yeah, I'm heading out." He paused for a moment and rubbed at the back of his neck before saying. "Unless you need some company. I could stay if you need to talk."

Warning bells went off in my head. I knew he was flirting, but he seemed innocent enough, and I was in a mood to burn the whole world down over my stupid lot in life. So I threw caution to the wind and said, "Sure."

Talking with Collum was easy. He was attractive and paid a lot of attention to what I had to say. I told him nothing but lies, of course, but pretending to be someone else for a bit was nice.

When I came home that night, I walked in the door only seconds before Draco entered through the flames. Even though I knew I did nothing wrong, my conscience rang with alarm. While drifting off to sleep that night, I stopped kidding myself. I recognized that my trips to the bakery were pushing the limits, but at the same time, I didn't care. It felt good to keep something from the mercurial man who held all of my emotions in the palm of his hand.

Chatting with Collum at the end of his shift became a regular occurrence. He was a simple person, but I needed a bit of simplicity in my life. I learned how to time our conversations to be back by the time Draco arrived. The visits helped me to ride the waves of Draco's anger and desire better.

I felt nothing but friendship for the Muggle man, but I enjoyed having someone to spend time with that wasn't a Death Eater and didn't have thousands of complicated issues.

"Mrs.?" Millie's squeaky voice breaks through my racing thoughts.

She is standing beside me in the kitchen, eyeing me with suspicion.

"Mhmm?" I hum over the cup of warm tea that she just handed me.

"You won't be needing anything else?" She asks, giving me a stern look that's out of character for her.

"No. Thank you."

"Not anymore *tea*, " she adds, glaring at me.

I realize what she's trying to convey. She knows I've been sneaking out of the penthouse and spending more and more time on the first floor.

"Nope," I pop the consonant.

"Because, you know I can get Mrs. any tea she needs!"

"Thank you, Millie," I say as I watch her head off to do more cleaning. We finished making dinner, and it is bubbling away, waiting for Draco to return.

I walk to the living room, deciding to stay put and try to make the best of my interactions with Draco. He told me that he would come home early today and we could spend more time in the music room. I'm looking forward to forgetting some of our recent chillier interactions. But then, an owl taps against the glass. I head to the balcony and take the letter attached to its leg.

Plans changed.

That's all it says. Irritation floods my system, so I shoo the bird away and stalk toward the elevator.

"You're late. I was getting worried you might not show," Collum says as I sit down in a huff.

"Sorry, I was waiting for something. How was your day?"

Fuck Draco and his mood swings. Last night he was slow and passionate as he took me. He folded me under his warm body as we drifted to sleep and kissed me goodbye this morning — tonight, he blows me off.

The rational side of my brain understands that Draco doesn't have control over his schedule, but I don't let him off the hook. I'm angry that I've been in 1997 for five months, and it feels

like I'm getting nowhere. Draco and I are still tiptoeing around each other. He's hot and then cold. It's maddening.

"Hermione?" Collum asks.

"Sorry?"

I didn't hear the question. I can tell Collum knows that my mind is somewhere else.

"Have you thought any more about my offer?" he asks again.

Collum has been vying for us to meet outside of his work. He's very eager — he asks almost every time we get together if I want to go for a walk or get a bite somewhere else. Recently, he's been fixating on taking me to Buckingham Palace since I mentioned that I'd never seen it in person. Or at least I don't remember seeing it.

"I don't know, Collum. I kinda' like it here," I hedge.

Time in the bakery feels like a break from reality. I can imagine that I'm a Muggle, living an ordinary life. I'm not worried about whether my husband loves me in this time or in the future. I don't have to worry about whether or not I'll ever enjoy a real relationship with the person who turns out to be my rapist. Collum is easy. He's a breath of fresh air. But I don't want to take this tryst too far. I know that it's mean to lead him on.

A shadow falls over me as I stare out the window, lost in thought.

"Hey there, love. Sorry, I'm late."

Draco's large, heavy hands land on my shoulders as he kisses the top of my head.

"Hermione?" Collum asks again. He sits up straighter with a deeply furrowed brow as Draco pulls up a chair and plops down beside me, *smiling?*

Fear creeps up my neck. Draco looks jovial, but I can feel his anger boiling below the surface. I close my eyes and hear Collum ask, "Sorry, who are you?" He's aghast.

This was a stupid idea.

Draco throws his arm around my shoulder and leans back. He's wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and he looks the perfect image of a Muggle — a hot as hell, utterly pissed-off Muggle.

Our eyes lock as he leans to brush my hair behind my ear, and my stomach drops. Draco stares at me with the cheery façade of a man who is furious but trying to reign it in for the sake of the other bakery customers. He responds without taking his eyes off of me. "I'm her husband." He cranes his neck to pierce Collum with a dangerous gaze. "Who the fuck are *you*?"

"You're what!?" Collum exclaims.

I hear the kind Muggle sitting across from me, but his words hardly register. I'm stuck in the pull of Draco's gaze. With a slight shift of his brow, his controlling and arrogant expression says, *We're leaving. Now.*

"Oh right, this is your friend you keep telling me about," Draco continues. "The *clerk* right?"

"Draco—" I plead. He's embarrassing Collum, and it makes me feel awful.

"Oh, shit! Sweetheart," Draco feigns. "I forgot. We've got reservations tonight at Le Gavroche. We don't have time for this introduction. Say goodbye to your little friend, love," he orders before turning to face Collum. "She won't be seeing you again."

Draco is calm and terrifying. I feel like such an ass for mixing this poor man up in my crazy life. It's better to admit my mistake and move on. "Bye, Collum."

"Wait, what the hell is going on?" Collum sputters.

I stand up to leave as Draco places his hand on my lower back and ushers me away. "I need to go. I'm sorry."

As we leave, I hear Collum call, "Hermione?"

We head to the elevator in silence. I can feel Draco's displeasure pouring off of him in angry shards. When we exit the sliding doors into the apartment, I catch a flash of Millie's bat-like ears watching from around the corner. I forgot how much she loves to run and tell Draco everything I'm up to. My warm feelings for the elf grow cold.

I turn to head toward my room and hear Draco's icy voice. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

I sigh, "Draco it was nothing. I just enjoyed having a friend. Don't make such a big deal over something you don't even care about!" I continue walking but jump when, in an instant, he's blocking my way.

"Go sit down, sweetheart."

Ah, yes. Here is my controlling, irrational *owner*. I'm a moron for thinking that I might be getting through to him. My heart hurts as I follow his orders and prepare myself for what's to come. Draco heads to a bar cart and pours himself a drink.

"Are you out of your goddamned mind?"

"Gods, Draco. leave me alone. It's not like you care about me! You've made it very clear that you have no interest in this relationship. Don't start acting all jealous when you couldn't give two shits!"

"What the hell do I have to be jealous of, love? He's a ruddy Muggle — a bakery clerk. I'm Draco fucking Malfoy. I own this god damn building. I'm a wizard — a Death Eater! You think he intimidates *me*?"

I see him start to boil over with anger.

"Did you forget that there's a Wizarding *war* going on?" He's grasping his tumbler so hard his ice shakes.

I groan. I *had* considered that, but I wasn't too worried. None of the reports I read mentioned anything about battles in the middle of Muggle London. It was probably the safest place for me. Plus, I'm alive in the future, so...

"I was fine. I — "

He cuts me off. "You what!? Had your Muggle boyfriend to protect you from the Dark Lord?" He's seething. A small part of me smiles on the inside. He's been so devoid of any emotion. At least now, he feels something. "Honestly, are you *trying* to get yourself killed?"

"Come off it, Draco! I wasn't in any real danger. Do you really think that Voldemort might slither into a bakery one day to grab a scone when he's out pursuing world domination?" Draco's lips pull into a tight scowl as I rail at him. "Or, did you think that his Death Eaters would show up and create a scene in front of all those Muggles. Give me a break."

"I told you to stay put!"

"I'm not sure you ever said that! Plus, who are you to tell me what to do?"

"I'm your bloody husband!"

All self-righteous joking vanishes. I feel a shot of electric malice skate over my skin. I jump to my feet, sneering, "And that gives you what permission, Draco!? You don't get to push me around just because we are bound to one another!!"

He doesn't know what he walked into. He doesn't know how much my skin crawls over how he treated me in 2004. I feel a vicious desire to cut him down and take him to task.

"The fuck I don't!" he growls. "You dropped into *my* life! You forced me to protect you and your wandless ass! You put me and my family in danger and demanded that I fall for you. You —"

" *I* didn't do any of that!! YOU sent me back in time!"

"That's enough!" he yells, then catches himself and takes several deep breaths. When he's calm again, he adds, pointing at the entrance to the apartment. "That door will be locked from here on out."

"Of course it will." I spit with vicious sarcasm. He's nothing if not consistent.

"Take some time to cool off, Hermione. But, I expect you in MY *fucking* bed tonight. " He says while finishing his drink and slamming it on the mantel.

I snarl in anger, "ARGH!"

Draco continues with his slicing retort. "And, don't even pretend like that Muggle twat could get you anywhere near as wet as I can with one fucking look."

Chapter 14: Affection

Chapter Summary

I am terrified of love
I am scared to open up
I keep thinking you will run
Say you want the naked me
Scars and instability
I keep thinking you will leave
But you say I won't let you fall down
I won't let you fall down
I won't let you fall
And maybe
I could take my walls down
And I could risk it all now
I could risk it all
No I won't let you fall
No I won't let you fall
No I won't let you fall
No I won't let you fall
No I won't let you fall
-Fall, EMM

"Stop!" I cry as Draco turns to leave — ignoring me.

"Draco, please."

He continues toward the steps, running his hand through his hair and breathing fire.

"Draco! It's not my fault that you're mad at yourself for falling for me!" I huff, feeling my long curls cascade over my shoulders. I brush them back, hoping to look stern and deserving of respect.

That does the trick. My angry husband stops in his tracks, pulls on his invisible armor of self-protection, and inches around to face me. Then, he shoves his hands in his pockets, staring me down. Gods, this man is hot. He looms over the living room, compelling everything in his gaze to stop and heed his word. Still in the Muggle jeans and t-shirt, he looks younger, more carefree, but dead serious. From what I can tell, Draco hasn't been young in a very long time. He was forced to grow up. However, despite his icy exterior, I know he's developing feelings for me. I've been paying close attention because if I can get this man to fall for me, I might be able to rewrite my future.

Over the past several months, we inched closer to one another, and though it frustrates and confuses him, it's the truth. Once we settled in the condo, Draco started to spend more and more time with me, always with one excuse or another. Sometimes it felt like whenever Voldemort wasn't dictating his actions; he was either on top of me or glued to my side. I see his affection in how he smiles at me over meals or always seems on the verge of kissing me, even if he ends up forcing himself to refrain. The obviousness of his fondness for me, yet his insistence on denying those feelings, causes me to feel so lost at times.

For instance, a few nights ago, as we sat together before the fire, he ghosted his thumb over the soft underside of my wrist while holding me. The feeling of the circles that Draco drew on my skin caused me to melt into his body.

It was a beautiful night with the penthouse lights dimmed and the fire crackling before us. The kind of evening that helped me forget all the terrible circumstances of our love story and let my mind clear while I snuggled into his embrace.

"You're not like I thought you would be, Granger," he said out of nowhere.

I turned to face him. "How so?"

"You were always so buttoned-up and studious at school. I never imagined that you could be so thoughtful — caring."

I kept quiet but urged him to keep talking by running my hands along his temple and offering him my softest gaze. This train of thought was dangerous territory. I didn't want him to ask me questions about our time at school as a youth. I wouldn't be able to answer.

He continued as he spun me around and wrapped me in his arms. "I notice."

"Notice what?" I asked despite myself. I liked how his husky voice sounded and wanted to hear more.

"I notice all the small things that you do for me," he said as he captured my hand and pulled my fingers to his lips. "You're always waiting here by the fire for me to return each day."

Draco bent to whisper into my neck, "I know that you do that on purpose witch, even if you pretend that's not the case." His lips on my sensitive skin felt sinful. "You're cute, acting like you just happened to be knitting or reading there."

He wasn't wrong. I have been waiting for him — sometimes to make sure he didn't catch on to my trips down to the bakery, but mostly because I have this need to be near him that has nothing to do with the bond. He fascinates me. It's like watching the pure, unedited version of my future husband. Cataloging his strength, passion, and loyalty makes my heart ache — what happened to you to turn you so evil?

"You pay attention to my moods and bring me Firewhiskey when I've had an awful day or pull me into the music room when I need a distraction. And you —" he paused. I felt the cool air brush my neck when he lifted his eyes to mine. It was as if Draco reflected a universe of needs and possibilities to me. "You always know what to say. It's like you've known me forever, and you know just how to respond to help pull me from my sour disposition."

I inwardly sighed at the palpable irony, thinking that I didn't have a single memory without him because of his actions. "Draco, I *have* known you forever," I said, hoping to convince him that I alluded to the length of our love affair, nearly a decade in the making.

He cleared his throat, shifted his weight, and said, "Right. Well, it's just not what I imagined. It's — nice."

Moments like that cause me to become more and more determined to manipulate him into loving me, I tell myself. The more time I'm here, the greater my chance of succeeding. I just need him to stop rejecting me!

He still hasn't said anything as he breathes fire by the steps, so I barrel on. "A — and falling for me isn't *your* fault either." I stumble over my words, trying to get my point across. I let out a long sigh and drop my shoulders. "Neither of us had a choice. Our connection was predestined."

Draco's jaw tightens as I talk. I know he doesn't want to hear that our relationship is inevitable. He has so little control over his life. Voldemort tells him where to be and what to do. His parents forced him into his role as a Death Eater. He works every day to keep those he loves safe.

I'm sheltered from much of the dealings of the war, but when Draco decides to open up, he expresses his anxieties. He worries about how his father is wasting away, becoming a shell of his former self, and his mother's health is failing due to stress. As their only son, he feels immense pressure to protect them. Draco would never admit how furious he is at his parents for putting their family in this position, but I see how it eats away at him.

"They were so misguided!" he said one night, clenching his fists. "Voldemort treats my father like shit now because of his failings, and it's all I can do to keep the attention on myself. I'm trying every day to be the best soldier I can in this godforsaken war, just so that I don't have to —" he trailed off. But I knew he was going to say something like, *watch as they're murdered before my eyes*.

I refocus on the argument at hand as Draco finally breaks his silence. "This isn't about *us*, witch! I just don't need anything else to worry about!"

He rubs at the back of his neck as he tries to soothe the anger from his shoulders as he talks. "You could've run into any of the several Death Eaters tasked with hunting you down." He closes his eyes and rubs the bridge of his nose. "If that happened, they would've used Legilimency on you," The thought of a foul Death Eater tearing into my mind is terrifying. They'd find the future and the past. Plus, it would probably cause me to go into a coma from mental exhaustion. My irritation starts to melt as I consider Draco's protectiveness over me. But then he continues, "and I can't be discovered harboring you in my home. It would mean my death sentence."

Draco's last assertion falls flat. It's not convincing. This is the man who is consumed with saving those that he loves. He frequently puts himself at great risk to achieve that goal, volunteering for dangerous and intense missions. He isn't worried about himself. He's pretending that I don't matter to him again. It makes my neck feel hot with anger.

"But —," I start to reply.

Draco doesn't wait to hear what I have to say. He turns around and marches down the hall to his study, leaving me standing alone in the living room, fuming.

I watch him walk away as I pace the living room in anger. I'm furious with how the evening turned out. I was going to spend a quiet night with Draco, and instead, we ended up yelling at each other over our respective idiocy. He won't admit his feelings, and I knew I shouldn't be spending so much time distracting myself with visions of a simple Muggle life that the universe never intended me to have. After a minute, I decide to blow off some steam practicing the violin like I had planned to originally. Draco be damned. However, as I head down the hall, I hear Draco talking to Millie in his study. The sound causes me to pause and flatten myself against the wall as I listen.

"Go to the Manor and give my apologies for leaving so suddenly. My aunt is visiting. She wanted to duel with me after dinner." I hear Draco plop down into his desk chair, and Millie scurry to him, offering a drink. "She can't become suspicious."

"Yes, Master Draco. I'll tell them you...you?"

"Tell them that I'm sick," he groans, then perks up again. "But do *not* let anyone visit! No matter what they say. I'll change the wards before you leave."

"Yes, Sir. I will help you keep Mrs. safe!"

Draco responds, sounding quieter, but relieved. "Thank you, Millie."

"Sir?" Millie whispers. I can hear the trembling in her voice.

"Hmm?"

"I is s—sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"That will be all, Millie."

I hurry to duck down the hall and into the music room when the little elf turns to leave. When I'm safely in the room, though, I sit and lose myself in thinking over what I just heard. Draco was supposed to entertain Bellatrix Lestrange tonight. I know from Remus's accounts and the many *Daily Prophets* that I read that the witch was volatile and very close to Voldemort's ear.

I shudder to think how horrible it would be if she found me here and start to understand why Draco had to change plans tonight. He was trying to keep her happy and not give her any reasons to become curious about his life off the clock.

I think for a long time. Draco and I are stuck in this pattern of drawing closer to one another only to retreat again. I need to get him to admit that his feelings are changing.

Several hours later, I pad up the steps toward Draco's room with a pit in my stomach. He didn't join me for dinner, so I was left to eat in silence. I could've invited Millie to chat with me, but her treason still smarts.

As I push the door open, I hear a soft creak. The room is dark, allowing London's lights to twinkle and shine. The view is even more spectacular now because it's so close to Christmas.

Gentle hues of red and green from holiday decorations across town shimmer on the walls. The effect is magical.

As I click the door shut behind me, Draco walks out of the ensuite, having just left the shower. His hair is wet, and his sleep trunks hang low on his hips. He uses a towel to wick away the water from his pale locks, and I feel my heartbeat racing.

He's just an attractive man. Anyone would be turned on by his physique and general air of authority.

Falling for Draco was never part of my plan. I can't. The Draco of the future ruined any chance of me feeling safe in his presence. I recognize that I'm tied to him and that my body needs him, but I've walled off my heart to the possibility of more. This mission of mine isn't about my feelings. It's about his and how those feelings can change my circumstances. That's it! But this younger version of my husband is appealing.

I take a deep breath and meet Draco by the window, glancing upwards. He's over a foot taller than me, so his broad chest is at my eye level, and I have to crane my neck to reach his eyes. But when I do, I feel sparks of energy travel from my head to my toes. His pull is hypnotic.

Draco watches me as I wrap my hands up his bare torso around his neck, pressing our bodies together.

"If you don't want to get caught harboring me in your home, then why lock the doors?" I croon. "Leave them unlocked and I'll slip out while you're sleeping. It'll save you the headache of caring for me."

"Very funny," he says in his low voice.

He's not as mad as before, so I press on, trying to make a point. "I'm serious! I could find somewhere to go. Get me a wand and I'll find my own place. I'll let you know where I am when I'm settled. We can Apparate to each other when we need to appease our bond."

Draco places his hand under my chin, commanding my attention. "Love, don't play games." I can see a fire burning in his eyes.

I rise on my tiptoes to place a kiss on his jaw. "Draco," I ghost my lips over his neck. "Let yourself care for me." I hear his deep growl from low in his chest. "There's no one here but us. It's okay to tell me the truth. I feel your affection through our bond."

Draco's strong hand grasps my jaw as he kisses me. His intensity ignites our passions as he caresses my tongue with his. My magical core hums in appreciation of his seduction. I lean into him, encouraging him to advance. Merlin, it feels so good.

"It's not that easy," he says as he pulls away. "I *can't* develop feelings for you," he whispers. "Voldemort dictates my every move. You're a very significant Undesirable and in incredible danger being with me. I can't let this go any further." He clenches his jaw and gnashes his teeth. "But, you're right. I can't shake you, either. You've wedged your way into my —" his voice trails off, but then he finishes by lamenting, "Our relationship is doomed."

Draco leans his forehead against mine as he finally starts to let me behind his carefully constructed mask of protection.

"Don't say that," I plead. "We're not doomed. We're here together, holding each other — safe in your home."

In an instant, Draco seems agitated again. He fumes as he pushes away.

"The Dark Lord is furious," he says. "He can't find you and Potter, and it's making him even more erratic and dangerous." I place my heels back on the ground and listen while I wind our fingers together. I see the cracks in Draco's armor as he admits, "He thinks that I should know more since we attended Hogwarts together. He —" Draco looks pained. He clears his throat and continues. "He threatened me and my parents. If we don't find you by the new year, he'll torture us for sport. He'll murder us, and then you'll be alone and unprotected."

I feel a pang of guilt. Locked behind Draco's many walls, it's easy to forget how terrible the Wizarding world is and how much he endures on a daily basis.

"I *have* to figure something out," Draco demands.

He spins me to face the glass and growls, "I've tried for a very long time to avoid the pull of this bond, Hermione. You're right. I can't do it anymore. There's no way I am giving you up, and if that means protecting your younger, bratty ass from the Dark Lord then so be it." Draco begins to kiss my neck as I watch all the colorful lights below.

I think for a long while about how to resolve this tricky problem as I enjoy how he runs his hands over my body. The beauty in front of me and the perfection of my young husband's touch causes me to melt into the moment. I brush away a tear, realizing how unfair it is that I'm trapped in the past with a version of Draco that seems genuine and vulnerable — everything I always wanted from him. Yet, I know how off the rails he becomes in the future. It causes me to grieve again over what our relationship might have been. In my melancholy state, I take in the lights and sigh. I love Christmas, I muse, trying to pull myself away from the pit growing in my stomach. This isn't about how I feel. This is about changing my future! The holidays are a perfect time of year. Everyone is hopeful and joyous —.

"Oh my gods!" I shriek.

My exclamation startles Draco's lips from my skin. "What is it?"

"Tomorrow's Christmas!"

"Right," Draco says, sounding a bit confused. "I'm sorry. Did you want to decorate or something? I could have Millie—"

"No! I've realized something!"

"And that is...?"

"I know where I am!"

"Okay..." Draco still hasn't caught on.

"You can tell him where to find me!"

The way our magical cores pull tight and snap causes my breath to catch. The poignant moment between us is gone, and fury creeps back into Draco's expression.

"Did you not just hear me, Hermione? I'm not going to give you up. I can't now. I'm stuck."

"Yes, I heard you, but this can save you!"

His voice is dangerous as he says, "While putting *you* at risk. The answer is no."

I know how the situation played out. Harry Potter and I visited Goddric's Hollow, and Nagini attacked us. We made it out alive, though. Remus told me!

However, it's clear that if Draco thinks he will be harming me, he won't use the information to his advantage. So, I decide to rewrite history a bit.

"No, no, I mean — I'm not there, it's Harry Potter!"

Draco's eyes blow wide in confusion. He looks irritated and suspicious. "What are you talking about, love? And, *Harry Potter*!? Did you think I wouldn't know who you were talking about if you said, 'Harry?' Since when do you refer to him by his full name?"

Shit!

"Harry! I just misspoke. Listen, While we were on the run Harry wanted to visit Godddrics Hollow."

Draco's eyes narrow to slits. "I thought you didn't want to tell me about the past."

"Nevermind that. Listen! Harry will be in Godddrics Hollow visiting Bathilda Bagshot. Tonight!" I push past Draco as I race to grab his clothes. He stands by the window and watches me, suspicious of my odd behavior. When I have everything together, I shove his robes and boots into his chest, crying, "You'll win his favor. And, no one gets hurt. I promise! Hurry up. Go tell him!"

"Hermione —" I can see him warring with himself. He wants to believe me but can sense the lie in the offing. "Why don't you go with him then —to Godddrics Hollow? You go everywhere together."

I stumble over my words, pleading with Draco to believe me. "I, uh, hurt myself. Nothing serious!" I interject at the sight of his reaction. "I just couldn't make the trip. Ronald Wes—, uh, Ron stayed back with me." This seems like such a slam dunk. I can make Draco's life a little easier while keeping everyone safe. Remus testified that, though the altercation with Voldemort was harrowing, no one was hurt. "Draco, go, please!"

His features grow cold as he makes up his mind. Draco pulls on the mask he is forced to wear when doing Voldemort's bidding. "You swear, that you're not with Potter."

I raise to leave a sweet kiss on his lips.

"I swear."

I walk Draco down to the fire and kiss him good luck. After the green flames die, I stand in the empty living room, wringing my hands together. Everything feels so still and quiet, as if

the whole house is waiting on pins and needles to see what will happen.

After several minutes I end up in my room, standing in front of a low dresser on the far wall. I was distracted and don't remember walking here. So much rides on Remus's tales being correct. If Voldemort believes Draco, then he might receive significant praise. Though, as I stare at the crumpled picture of our fake wedding resting on the dresser's marble top, it occurs to me that Voldemort might be livid after he cannot catch Harry Potter. I see our smiling faces and feel odd anticipation and fear. What if I made the wrong choice? I know it's not smart to mess with time. I pick up the beaded sack I brought back to the Manor after Draco found me and rub it between my fingers. Then I set it down and pick up the small smooth stone that Firenze gave me in the forest; I run my fingers over its edges absentmindedly. Connecting with these objects I brought from the future helps me feel grounded as I wait. There are so few tangible things in my life. I cling to what I can, trying to make meaning and sense out of it all.

It feels like hours that I wait for Draco to return. Eventually, I crawl into bed and fall into a fitful sleep until I wake to a steady hand sliding between my legs.

I moan as I roll over in the dark, trying to take in Draco's expression. In the low light, I can tell that he looks unharmed, relieved even.

"It worked then?" I ask.

Draco smells like alcohol. He crawls over me and traps me under his large frame. I feel the comfort of his weight on me and know that we are both safe for now.

"It worked, you brilliant woman," he hums, capturing my lips and causing my head to spin. His kiss is soft and slow. Intentional, like he's imprinting himself on me.

A warm, tingling sensation begins to bloom in my lower abdomen, one I'm very familiar with feeling. I will never get over the indescribable ways that Draco makes my body sing. These moments are ours. Draco savors them, and I secretly live for how he controls my body. With all my life's complexities and the games I play, these moments of bliss are my recompense. I deserve them.

I wrap my legs around his middle and roll my hips to coax his lengthening shaft to attention. I mewl, feeling how he hardens against my apex through the thin barrier of my panties.

"And, you're okay? Your parents?" I ask. I need to know more about what happened, but my body also demands to release the tension I've been holding for the entire evening.

"They're fine," he answers into my lips. "And, I'm perfect." He finishes his response by thrusting into my core. "Undress me, love," he demands.

Draco holds his weight on his forearms and bends his neck to pull my breast from my tank top. He suckles on my nipple, causing lightning to shoot through me.

"I — yes, oh fuck. Yes, but really, how did he respond?" I stumble over my words, warring with my competing desires to know more and get lost in his touch.

"He promoted me in rank and then demanded everyone get drunk as he celebrated the idea of potentially catching Potter," Draco offers. Then, "Now stop talking, and do as you're told."

I sense Draco's relief and need to soothe his complex feelings with my willing body. He's thrilled and lighter now that his immediate threat is gone. I close my eyes and steady my raging desire. I love when he talks like this. It's sexy and taboo. I know I shouldn't because he ends up controlling me in the future, but he also trained my body to respond to his dominance. At least in this timeline, I can choose when I allow him to control me.

I puff out a sardonic laugh. The future Draco was right. I do like it a little rough.

I reach between our bodies and drag his leather belt through its loop, hearing it clink. Draco continues to press into my sex, which causes me to drip with sticky want. I feel through the bond that he is holding back his aggressive need to take me while I work his zipper down. We're locked in each other's gaze, savoring the moment as I follow his order.

When I'm almost finished freeing his iron phallus, I pause to shimmy my panties down my legs. But Draco's deep drawl stops me in my tracks.

"Don't," he orders. I feel our breaths in tandem as I await his next directive. "Pull them aside. show me your wet cunt."

Draco leans his weight to one side as my body shutters at the sounds of his voice — his cool confidence. I bite my lower lip as he gives me a cocky lift of his head, encouraging me to *go on*. Then he bends his neck to watch as I dip my shaky fingers under the soaked cotton and through my folds. I brush along my clit once, for his pleasure — and mine. Then circle it again as my breath hitches in my throat.

"Mmm," I hear him hum. "Good girl."

His shoulders tense as he frees one hand and pulls his throbbing cock from his waistband. Then, I feel his velvety smooth head run through my core and sink into my pussy.

My mind goes blank, and I commit to the sensation of his hard shaft splitting me in two. Each entrance is, like the first time, delicious and electrifying. I'm awash in his fullness, lost to the feeling when he barks. "Don't stop."

I open my eyes to see his firm expression. He lowers his heavy weight to me again, trapping my body under his as he says, "Keep your fingers on your sweet little cunt. I want to feel you cum on my cock."

I kiss him, pulling his lower lip into my mouth and sucking as I run my hand back through my sex. I find home at my pulsing clit and cry out in pleasure. It is overwhelming to feel such relief and sexual need simultaneously. I was tied up in knots all night and now feel the bowstrings of my core pulling tight, ready to explode.

"That's it, love." Draco growls. He waits for me to circle my clit once, twice — I let out a soft breath of ecstasy before he starts to move.

He inches out and raises to sit on his knees, watching my fingers move around my fat nub. He's transfixed with how my body shakes in response to the stimulation. I whine for him to return. I need to feel him lodged inside me again.

That's all it takes. Draco thrusts into me again, filling me to the brim and causing me to pull another tight breath I love the feeling of him housed within me. I circle my clit again, and he pulls out, then rocks his hips again and plants himself at my cervix. He's taking his time, enjoying each sensation.

My heart rate starts to flutter as he moves at a steady rhythm, sliding in and out of my dripping channel as I attempt to wring an orgasm from myself. He pulls out, then pushes in again, and I begin to climb, but I can't find the right pressure; I need more.

Draco feels my needy frustration and pulls my small hand from between our sweaty bodies. He brings my fingers to his lips and sucks the milky wetness from their tips.

He continues moving in and out as he states what we both know.

"You need me, baby?"

"Yes." I whisper. "Please."

The next thing I know, his thick fingers run through my drenched labia. His strong digits find my center, and I cry, "Oh shit!" as he chuckles. He is still thumping into me, then back out again as I press the palm of his hand against my pelvic bone and hold him in place. "Right there," I whimper.

"Shhh."

A torrent of burning pleasure pours through me in waves. I feel him moving within me, stuffing me full and caressing my inner walls as he provides the exact touch I need to my clit.

My breasts bounce as he picks up his pace, determined now to see us both to completion. He notices and swipes his tongue over my sharp tits again, causing me to purr.

The soft mattress envelopes me as his hard body moves over my frame. His advance, weight, thickness, and perfect fingers overwhelm me. My breath starts to quicken, and I press harder on his hand.

"Yes, love. You're almost there. Just a little more. I want to hear you."

"Oh god, Draco!" I bite my lip and begin to pant as he circles again and again over a bundle of nerves. Everything in my body is alight with the power building in my core. He swipes again, and I groan. Then he presses just a bit harder before pulling back and flicking me over and over again. The sudden change in pressure sends me over the edge. The featherlight way that he tickles my clit causes near-painful energy crashes to shoot from my sex to my feet. He continues to pump into me as I scream, "Oh fuck! Mmmm! I, oh, Draco, fuck!" I yell as the wave of pleasure crests; I press his hand down and feel the strong pressure return as I clench his cock, and my pulse thumps against his fingers.

I feel my walls clutching him, pulsating on his shaft as he comes undone. Draco roars out his spend and clamps onto my body to hold out for the final spasms of pleasure. We grasp each other, breathing hard and shaking as the last waves crash over us in perfect union.

Finally, we come down. My full breast spills over the edge of my shirt, and my knickers are destroyed. Draco's pants are around his hips, and his shirt is pulled up, allowing our bodies to press into each other. He grabs the back of his shirt and drags it over his head to let the cool air skate over his skin. But he doesn't get up. He allows us a few more moments of connection before he pulls away.

Draco stares into my eyes and brushes my curls from my forehead. He looks strong and sexy, in awe of our connection. "Hermione, you're amazing." He kisses me. "Thank you. You saved me."

I don't know what to say. The sincerity of his words melts my hardened heart. He looks hopeful like the future might not contain merely war and violence. I ache for that to be true.

"I —," I begin to respond, but there is a *Crack!* and I hear Millie's squeaky voice.

"Master,"

Draco cages me under his large frame, hiding me from her view. "What is it?" he growls, unhappy with the interruption.

"The Dark Lord returned Sir. He's —"

I begin to squirm under Draco's hold, knowing what is about to happen.

"He's angry. He nearly caught Harry Potter."

I feel Draco's irritation roll over his shoulders. "Thank you, Millie. Leave us —,"

"Young M—Mrs. and Harry Potter escaped, Sir." she continues, and I feel Draco's body tense with anger. He whips his neck over his shoulder to stare down the tiny house elf.

"Potter *and* Mrs!?" he asks in a dangerous tone.

As Millie eeks out another *yes, Sir*. Draco's piercing eyes pin me to the bed.

Shit.

Chapter 15: Bliss

Chapter Summary

"Oh, I love it and I hate it at the same time
You and I drink the poison from the same vine
Oh, I love it and I hate it at the same time
Hidin' all of our sins from the daylight
From the daylight, runnin' from the daylight
From the daylight, runnin' from the daylight
Oh, I love it and I hate it at the same time"
-Daylight, David Kushner

Chapter Notes

Hello all you lovely readers! Thank you so much for continuing to follow this piece.
Your kudos and comments are greatly appreciated. You are wonderful! Happy reading!

"Millie, leave us."

Draco demands. Then he sits up and places his feet on the ground with his back to me, hanging his head and rubbing at his neck before straightening. I watch his shoulders flex as he continues in a deep, frustrated tone.

"You lied to me."

I wait for a beat, feeling his disappointment through the bond. It causes me to second-guess myself.

"You wouldn't have used the information if I told you the truth, and I wasn't hurt!" I reason.

I don't know why I'm bothering to defend my actions. Except that I want Draco to continue opening up to me. This argument could derail our progress. It's definitely not that I care what he feels!

Taking in my surroundings, I realize that we're still in my room. We've never made love here before. What made the difference in Draco's mind? Maybe he felt so relieved that he didn't want to waste time carrying me upstairs.

"The intel you gave was true. You were promoted. You're safe."

Draco scoffs. He whips around and narrows his eyes at me, tightening his lips and shaking his head. Then he stands and bounces on his toes to pull his pants up his hips. He zips himself and threads his belt before stomping away. Never one to forget, he flicks his wand on his way out the door and I feel the tiny shivers of the contraceptive charm.

When he's gone, I crawl out of bed, pull on a soft robe hanging on a hook in my ensuite, and stare at myself in the mirror. My pert, rosy nipples are visible through the thin fabric of my pajama top, so I pull the robe tighter across my chest. When I lower my eyes, I notice my bare legs shake where the fabric stops at my upper thighs. I look properly fucked.

I gather my long tangle of thick curls in both hands and secure them in a messy bun on the top of my head, then head out in search of my irritable husband.

The lights that illuminate the floor of the hallway are soft and inviting. They guide me as I pad to the kitchen where I hear the clinking of glass bottles. The bond cracks and pops as I enter the room to find Draco standing in front of the open fridge, looking lost. I roll my eyes. This man hasn't cooked a day in his life.

I walk into the kitchen, shaking my head. I don't want him to shut me out. Earlier, it felt like Draco, and I were making headway. I hop up on the counter and hold the edge of the marble as I attempt to get his attention.

"Hey, I'm sorry."

Draco pauses with his hands on the door. He closes the fridge and turns to face me.

I keep talking, hoping to smooth things over between us. "You never ate dinner. Do you want me to pull something together for you? Millie made lasagna."

My young husband pushes my knees apart and meets me at the large island. My legs circle his middle as he threads his hands into my hair and tilts my head to face him.

"Tell me what happened. Every detail." His voice brokes no argument, but then he asks with concern, "Are you hurt?"

I roll my lips and shake my head, hoping he won't force me to answer.

"Damn it Hermione! You already broke your rule about not telling me what happens in the past. You played with time—tempted the fates. Now, just tell me."

I lift my hand to loosen his hold on my hair and then place my forehead on his shoulder. It feels so wrong that I'm forced to pull the strings, directing this man's life. He doesn't deserve to have me making decisions on his behalf. Yet, here we are. I brush away a hollow pit that is forming in my stomach as I realize I'm doing what future Draco does to me. I can't think about that now!

I started this plan to improve my future, but as the days passed, I also began to hope for a better future for Draco. He's passionate and caring. He wants nothing but safety and prosperity for those he loves. I want to keep him this way—not thrust him onto his path of wretched destruction serving as one of Voldemort's top-ranking lackeys.

I take a deep breath, wondering for the first time how much my actions might add to his future drift toward the darkness.

Scrunching my eyes, I feel him wrap his arm around my shoulder. I'm playing a dangerous game, trying to force the future into what I want. What if I'm not as clever as I think I am?

"I can't," I whisper.

My statement is truer than Draco knows. I honestly can't tell him anymore. I don't remember, and Remus never explained what happened in great detail. All I know is that we took a misguided trip that put us at significant risk, but we escaped.

Draco growls as he pushes off the counter and paces. "I've had enough of your evasion. You're playing with fire!" He whips around, spitting, "And, you manipulated me!"

As I watch him stalk away, I worry that I'll lose him. I want to give Draco enough information to build trust in me and our relationship. I want him to stop running away from me every time he starts to feel something. I desperately try to keep his attention by doing the only thing I can.

I lie.

"It's not that I don't want to tell you! It's just that you *can't* find out — you can't know what happened. It has something to do...", "I stumble over my words, trying to sound convincing. "...with a key action you take in the future! You have to remain unaware!"

A *Slam* ! Startles me as a copper fruit bowl crashes to the ground spilling oranges over the counter. Draco pushed it in anger. He starts for the door, so I hop off the island and reach for him before he leaves. He slows as I place a tender hand on his forearm. Frustration is etched across the look he offers. I can see that he wants to stay. Something inside of him wants to believe me, but he can sense my deceitfulness, and it gnaws at his core.

"Hey, I'm sorry. Please, come sit," I plead, ushering Draco to the kitchen table. "You're probably starving. You had a big night. Just relax. I'll grab you something."

Draco scowls, but he sits. I ensure he'll stay before hurrying to grab him something to eat. He watches me closely as I walk to the fridge, pulling out the lasagna pan and a glass bowl of broccoli. After I make him up a plate, I also grab a hunk of French bread from the rolltop cabinet. The food is cold, and Draco's wizard's kitchen doesn't have a microwave, so I place the meal and a cup of sparkling water in front of him.

"You'll need to warm it up," I say, trying to keep my voice light, but I know he can sense my frustration at not being able to warm it myself. "Unless you want me to call for Millie."

The silver of Draco's eyes tracked my movements as I worked. He watched me with a sense of wonder, and his irritation relaxed a fraction. We sit across from each other, feeling the bond pull and hum.

This man who spends his entire life caring for others wants to be cared for. He's told me as much several times. He likes that I tend to his needs. I tuck that realization away for future exploitation. It seems odd that such a strong man would need anyone to do anything for him, but it makes sense. Voldemort forced him to enter the war at a young age, and he feels alone and neglected. If there is one thing that I am good at, it is caring for my husband. Whether by little acts of kindness like this or offering him my body. I know what makes him tick.

Several thoughts cross his expression. Draco is trying to study me to determine my intentions and motivations. I must be as much of a mystery to him as his older self was to me.

One side of my mouth lifts at the irony. He's exceptionally familiar with my body and still lost regarding my thoughts.

Something changes in his expression. Draco scowls as he shifts in his chair to pull out his wand, then places it on the table, sliding it over to me.

The gesture is significant. I haven't touched a wand since I arrived in 1997. Draco wasn't ready to extend that trust to me before. It's clear that he isn't ready now, either. But I sense that he *wants* to trust me—or he wants me to be trustworthy. He's been drinking, and the alcohol is making him more bold. He's testing to see what I'll do.

Elated, I grab the firm wood and wrap my fingers around it, noticing the shiver of magic. It feels heady, knowing I could use this wand to unlock doors, Apparate, or even charge a time-turner — if I had one. Draco continues watching me like a hawk as I cast the spell to warm his plate. A gentle whisp of steam rises from the food, confirming my success.

Then as Draco's eyes relax and he holds his hand out to take his wand back, I turn in my seat.

Draco looks furious for a second as if I confirmed his fears. Unphased, I flick the wand, and the copper bowl rights itself on the counter with the oranges back in their arrangement. Afterward, I hold out the wood, offering it to Draco with a sly smile. He sighs and sets it next to his plate as he picks up a fork.

After he takes a few bites, Draco says, "Fine, if you can't tell me about the past then I want to know about the future. I've changed my mind. I want to hear everything. Out with it!"

While not a perfect situation, this conversation is much easier. I take a deep breath and start to craft a love story.

"We get married on Grasmoor one week before the final battle." I start, parroting back the easiest lie I know. It's the one I've been told several times. "You and I meet this Spring and it's a fast love affair but we fall for each other hard."

"Show me." Draco interrupts my tale as he takes a bite of food, then wipes his mouth with his napkin and takes a drink of water.

"Sorry?" I ask.

"Show me that picture that you said you brought from the future."

This seems positive! I start to rise from my seat, but Draco stops me.

"Stay there," he orders. Then he casts a nonverbal summoning charm, and the crumpled photo floats to the kitchen from my bedroom. I grab it from midair and gaze at it for a second.

Our likenesses beam at me, up, out of the photo. Draco's arm is around my shoulder, and my arm is around his back. We look happy and in love. I still don't know how the future Draco fabricated this scene.

I hold my breath, hoping the photograph will convince Draco. Then I hand it to him.

Draco stares at the moving figures of us as they smile for the camera, looking in love with one another. His eyebrows furrow before he says, "This is you, Hermione." He takes another drink of water then tosses the picture on the table, rolling his eyes. "What bullshit are you trying to sell me now?"

I don't understand why he's so upset again. What did he see in the photo?

"What do you mean?" I stammer.

I'm starting to feel nervous. I still don't get what he's trying to tell me. Draco sees my look of confusion, so he explains.

"This picture isn't of your 18-year-old self." He stabs a finger at the photo and then back up at me. "That's you!"

"Wait, what? No it isn't! Why do you say that?"

Draco stares me down, dragging his eyes over my tight robe. "I know every inch of your body, Hermione." He sounds arrogant as hell, and it causes my insides to warm. "You no longer look anything like the frizzy-haired mouse I went to Hogwarts with." He flips the picture around to make his point. "This is my hot-as-fuck, confusing-as-hell wife!"

I drop my jaw and peer at the photo again, trying to understand its origins. Maybe he's right; perhaps the older Draco Imperioused me to stage this scene? Or, maybe this was when he bound me to him — maybe he gave me a love potion to make me look happy since he wanted me to think I was in love with him. He liked the lie. I realized that before he sent me back in time.

Shocked, I look up at my young, passionate, and honorable partner. Then back down at the photo, thinking about what Draco will do to me in the future. Then, realizing something, I jerk my head towards him again.

It's easy to forget that these two men — the dominant figures in my life are the same man.

What happens to you? I wonder, for the hundredth time.

I shake the thought. I need to stay focused on my story weaving.

"Well, being on the run must've made the difference," I lie. "You haven't seen my younger self for several months now. I changed once I left school. You uh— mention my looks the first time we reconnect."

Draco narrows his eyes but doesn't push. It's clear that he isn't convinced, but he doesn't press the issue, so I start to continue but stop again.

I'm curious now, though. "Plus, I couldn't have changed *that* much. I'm still the same person!"

"You're right. But you grew into your figure. You're more confident — more sexual," Draco says in a deep voice as I squeeze my thighs together in my seat. "You hold yourself differently."

That's because I spent the past several years screwing you! I huff, thinking about how, just as I had to teach this young Draco what I prefer in bed, he's molded me into the version of

myself that he finds the most alluring.

I barrel on. "We run into one another while you're on a mission. You tell me about how you don't really want to follow Voldemort, and I give you the information you need to take him down."

I'm completely making shit up now.

Draco looks uncomfortable as I craft my tale, but he doesn't order me to stop talking like he did all the other times I mentioned him defeating Voldemort.

"We just run into each other and start opening up to one another?" His voice is laced with skepticism. "Doesn't sound like me."

"Well, we get caught together." I hurry to explain. "I lose Harry and Ronald while we're Apparating away from some Death Eaters."

I work hard to pull together a story that sounds plausible. But then I have a thought about how to make the supposed reunion sound more convincing.

"You see me first as I'm hurrying to lay wards. I Splinch myself in the travel and though I'm not bad, I'm moving slowly and making mistakes. You —" I trail off to sell the story properly. Then I pretend to piece something together. "Goddric! It makes sense now! I always thought it was weird that you didn't drag me to Voldemort immediately. Instead, you take me to a safe house and interrogate me. We're there for weeks together, and that's when you open up to me." I try to drive my point home. "I wondered what happened to make you so willing to trust me. You never told me. It must be because of this conversation—because you have advance warning."

The more I talk, the deeper I dig a hole that I might not be able to crawl out of. If I'm hoisted back to 2004 tomorrow, Draco will eventually know I've made this story up. I have no idea how the Time-turner's magic works. Am I supposed to find another turner to send myself back to the future? Or will I be thrust back to 2004 someday when my borrowed time ends? I worry about Draco's actions when he discovers I made up this entire storyline. Will he seek

out my younger self and try to convince me that we're meant to be together? If he's successful, we might be able to escape Europe and find somewhere safe to live.

It's an appealing thought. A part of me likes the idea of a future with the two of us happily together. However, as I consider that unlikely scenario, I feel uneasy.

What if he doesn't go looking for me, we never reconnect, and we never get married? Will he still mistreat me when I land on his doorstep in the future? Will this time together mean nothing?

I only have a few clues. First off, Draco sent me back in time. He must've hoped that I'd do something to set the future straight. Maybe he doesn't want to follow Voldemort in 2004 and sent me here to improve things. If so, that's placing a lot of trust in me.

The only other option is the one I don't like to consider. It hurts too much. It's the simpler yet heartbreaking option that maybe — just maybe — this is when we start our relationship in 1997. While living together in Draco's penthouse, we fall for one another and marry on Grasmoor a week before the battle on Hogwarts. No one sees us together this year because Draco keeps me sequestered. And we really do have a secret love affair — star-crossed and epic.

But, no.

I refuse to let myself consider that possibility because that would mean that the love of my life chooses to regularly wipe my memories in the future — when he's not handing me over to be tortured by Voldemort or fucking me in front of hordes of Death Eaters.

Draco scowls as he takes another bite of lasagna and stares at our picture again. He looks irritated, but I feel a pang of longing through the bond. It's short-lived, though, and he finally huffs, "Nevermind. I don't want to know. You make up half the shit you tell me."

He's right. I do.

"But...", I smile, raising his glass in a salute. "My lies just saved your ass and got you promoted!"

"Cheers." He grumps, taking his water glass back and smirking at me over the rim as he drinks.

An hour later, we're settled in Draco's bed. My head is on his chest, and he's absentmindedly stroking my hair. My thoughts race regarding the past, present, and future. It's all a complicated mess that I can't parse out.

I'm startled from my sleepy wondering as Draco's low voice whispers, "When we supposedly run into one another later this spring — me and your younger self— will you...?"

I am still at the sound of his vulnerable question.

"... Be like this?" He runs the back of his hand down my arm. "I don't want some younger, swotty, bookworm."

I attempt to rise in defense of my teenage self, but Draco holds me firmly to his chest and continues.

"I want *you* ."

His statement causes my breath to catch. There is no way for him to know how much it means to me to hear him say those words. Ever since I can remember, I've been trying to live up to the ideal of my former perfect self.

But this Draco likes me for who *I* am.

A tear gathers in my eye, which I wipe away. I hug his body tighter, trying to convey my appreciation — all the words I cannot say. I hold him for a second and feel his strong arms

envelop me. The moment is perfect. I savor it a little bit longer then roll on top of him.

Something happens over the next several weeks. The events around Christmas change us. Draco admitted that he cares for me and therefore stops beating himself up over his feelings. He becomes more attentive, loving — protective.

He smiles more as we move around the penthouse, playing music together or reading on the couch. He's always reaching for me to wrap me in his arms and tuck my head under his chin. Or, he stands close by as I attempt to teach him how to make small meals, like toasted sandwiches.

At first, he protested my efforts to educate him on cooking, saying, "Love, that's what Millie's for."

I scowled, remembering how he bosses her around and expects her to do his cooking, cleaning, and spying!

I grumped, "You don't pay her enough to take on everything you ask. She deserves a raise." Then I turned around from the counter, pointing a spatula at him, asserting, "And you can learn to make your own snacks!"

Draco smirked at me with a curious tilt of his eyebrows. "Hermione, I don't *pay* her anything. She's a house elf!"

What ensued was an afternoon of me taking him to task for requiring her to work for free.

"That's slavery!!" I even yelled at one point.

Eventually, he chuckled while grabbing my waist and pulling me into his embrace.

"Fine, witch! I'll pay the elf," he murmured into my hair.

The next day Millie beamed as she scurried around our home in a fresh new dress and jumper.

Voldemort failed to capture Harry and my younger self in Goddric's Hollow, but something happened to make him very happy. He spends two weeks out of the country, leaving Draco the time to relax for once. While his evil boss is gone, we sleep in and lay in bed all day when we want. Draco locks the wards, and we enjoy being together with no interruptions.

All of those little shifts in Draco's attention are lovely. But, the real change happens within me. Draco's confession that he wants *me* seeps into my marrow. It nestles into my being and causes me to rethink everything.

The thought of manipulating him to achieve the future of my design begins to feel wrong, and I find myself wishing to slow time and stay in this reality forever. I completely let go of my scheming and worrying and enjoy this bliss while I can. I dive in head first, permitting myself to accept that he might have found his way into my heart.

We fuck like we're starving and can never get enough of one another. I spend time staring at Draco as he moves through the house, and it causes me to fidget with a crushing need to feel awash in his affection and touch.

"Come with me," he demands.

I turn to see him standing behind me as I sit at the kitchen table, thinking back over our past few weeks.

Happy to oblige, I rise from my seat near the tall windows and follow him to his study.

"What is it?"

"You'll see."

Laying on his desk are two boxes. One is big, and the other smaller and thin. He walks me into the room and guides me to the chair in front of his desk, awaiting business meetings and visitors. It's comfortable, so I wiggle my hips, enjoying the feel of the smooth leather.

Draco leans against the desk facing me with the boxes behind him. He smiles down at me for a moment, letting the pulse of our connection tingle over our bond. Then, he turns and picks up the larger present.

"Here, open it."

As he beams, I take the gift from him and pull the ribbon off before removing the lid. Inside I see a stack of parchment with small script written across it and official gold stamps.

I look up at him, confused. "Um, thanks?" I tease.

"Look closer, love," he directs with a lift of his chin.

The parchment is heavy as I pull the stack from the box and lay it across my lap. I begin to investigate, leafing through the pages, noting that they're legal documents regarding trusts and assets.

"Here," Draco offers me a quill. "Sign them," he orders before hastening to add, "But, use *Mrs. Draco Malfoy*. You can't use your first name. It's too dangerous.

"What?" I ask, holding the feather lightly in my palm.

"I want to add you to all of my accounts and holdings. If anything happens in the war and you need to run, or if I get hurt somehow. I want you to have the resources to get to safety."

"Draco this is too much!"

"Sign it, Hermione. Don't argue with me."

His authoritative request causes me to squirm again with want. I stare at him a little longer as his intense eyes capture my jumbled thoughts. He nods at the parchment, telling me to get on with it. So I place the quill on the paper and scratch my married name across several pages.

I have no use for money. I'm scrappy and find my way no matter what life throws at me. But Draco's concern for my well-being is touching.

"There. I signed." I smile up at him, adding, "Thank you. That should cover a trip on the Nightbus if I need to get out of London."

Draco laughs, "It'll cover a bit more than that sweetheart."

I stand and glide my hands up his torso and over his arms. "Thank you," I coo while placing a sweet, soft kiss on his lips.

"And here."

Draco places the smaller box in my open hand. My magical core shimmers with anticipation. The package is long and thin. I hold my breath, hoping that I'm right.

As I lift the lid, my breath catches in my throat. A gleaming new wand with a brilliant diamond ring threaded onto its wood rests on a soft, velvet cushion.

"It's hawthorn and unicorn hair," he says as I stare in shock. He lifts the wand from the packaging and tilts the ring into his hand. Then he picks up my hand and slides the ring on my finger.

He lifts my chin and kisses me back, humming into my lips, "I thought, since we're married you should probably have this." I stare at my finger as he says, "It's a family heirloom, passed down through five generations."

Later that night, I attempt to sleep but find that I'm wide awake. Hours pass as I toss and turn in our bed. Draco's steady breathing confirms that he's out. I don't want to wake him, so eventually, I decide to get out of bed and grab some tea to calm my nerves.

Once my mug is full of steamy Earl Grey, I plop down by the window in the kitchen again. The city lights blink, carrying a warm glow over London. I pull my knees to my chest, tucking them under Draco's oversized shirt.

Something is bothering me, and I can't quite pinpoint it. Life is almost perfect right now, there's no threat, and we have all the time in the world together.

I pull in a quick, shocked breath, sitting up straight with the mug cupped in my hands and my eyes blown wide. I realize why I'm restless. This perfect time together feels like my time with the older Draco before I found the note I left myself in *Hogwarts: A History*. This Draco is kind, sweet, and sexy as hell. I realize that he isn't so different from his future self. I've met this Draco before.

The thought feels like a sucker punch to the gut. I don't know what to make of it. I ache for what I know will happen to us. I was sure that our love story was a lie by the time Draco raped me and dragged me out of Order Headquarters — before sending me back in time! Now I don't know what to think, but I know that with every fiber of my being, I want this version of us to last. Light glints off my new wedding ring as I tilt my hand back and forth, staring at it. Then I hang my head and cry.

Chapter 16: Two Rights

Chapter Summary

"I used to hear 'em say
People don't ever change
But I'm growing out of who I was, yeah
Two rights don't fix a wrong
But I know it won't be long
'Til you turn me from the man I was
So with all my heart, I'm gonna love
With all my heart, I'm gonna trust
With all my heart, I'm gonna give you everything
So with all my heart, I'm gonna try
To play my part, to turn on the lights
When things get dark, I'm gonna give you everything"
-With All My Heart, Jvke

Chapter Notes

Hello folks! I'm back! Here is a chapter of mostly smut and a little plot. I needed to give Hermione and Draco one more moment of peace before all hell breaks loose. I'm already half done with the next chapter and will post soon!

I pace near the fire in the darkened living room. Draco is often home by now. It's almost 1:30 AM.

My chest shakes as I try to hone in on his location or mood through the bond. Since the new year, Draco's been sending me messages each night to let me know when he'll return. He has to be careful not to be discovered, so we devised a plan to have Millie follow him to Malfoy Manor each evening and bring me back news. However, tonight, she hasn't returned yet, either.

I let out a moan of frustration and try sitting to calm my nerves. Though the couch feels too soft, so I hop back up again and continue my march. My skin feels itchy. I'm jittery and lost.

Thankfully, minutes later there's a *Pop!* as Millie appears in the kitchen. I run to meet her, hoping for news, but find her twisting her hands in her skirt and biting her lip.

"What's wrong!?"

"I don't know, Mrs.," she squeaks. "Maybe nothing. But, Sir. hasn't come back yet. He left hours ago with five other men. He was leading some sort of charge."

"He didn't give you any clue?"

Draco usually mentions his plans aloud so Millie can hear and know what to tell me. It wasn't a perfect solution, but so far, it had worked.

"No. He didn't say anything for me to overhear. He kept quiet as he walked by me."

Millie stops talking, and I notice my ears begin to ring with a piercing headache. I throw my hands to my head and rub at my temples. I hate this war. I hate what it's done to my life and Draco. I'm pretty confident that he will survive to live with me in the future. But what if messing with time has changed his trajectory? Wasn't that my plan all along? What if I did something, and now I stay safe in the future because he gets hurt! My head throbs. I can't think about that too much.

"Mrs. you need to sit. I will bring you something to calm your nerves."

I sit for her sake but know that it's doubtful I will relax before I lay eyes on my husband. She scurries to the stove, happy to have something to do to help. The act soothes her more than me, but that's okay. Millie tilts some Earl Grey with a splash of cream onto the table a minute later. I hear the cup and saucer clink as they drag along the wood. She then snaps her fingers, and a small plate floats to the kitchen table with a couple of sweet-smelling digestive biscuits. I pretend to take a few bites so that she can stop staring at me. I can't stomach food.

Voldemort returned from his trip to Godric's Hollow with a manic obsession. He was furious that Harry Potter and my younger self escaped him, but rather than take his anger out on his followers, he became possessed with the identity of some teenager. Draco didn't understand what was happening but was glad for the break in the Dark Lord's cruelty.

I twist my wedding ring around my finger as my mind races. I wish I knew more about what happened this year, but I'm just as lost as Draco. Remus never mentioned anything about what happened after Christmas before *the incident*. I shudder, realizing that the longer I stay in this timeline, the closer I come to that fateful night. It churns my stomach to think of it.

The fire roars to life an hour later, causing me to jump from my seat and race to the living room. I barely register his physical state before throwing my arms around his neck. Draco's lips are on mine in an instant. I taste his relief at being home through his desperation and need to dip his tongue past my lips. He hoists me into his arms, wrapping my legs around his middle, and envelopes me in his embrace. I let him devour me and kiss him back with matched reverence. We both need to reconnect. Our nerves are fried, and we need to reassure each other that we're safe and together again.

Pulling away, I run my hands over his face, hairline, and down his neck, looking for injuries.

"Why do you smell like smoke?" I demand.

Draco bends his forehead to mine and draws a deep breath. I feel his shoulders shake as he talks.

"I'm fine," he says, sounding like he is trying to convince himself. "It was —," he pauses. "— awful."

I wait for him to continue, feeling my skin crawl.

"He demanded that we track down and kill two men who had been on the run for almost a year. They were innocent wizards, scared for their lives." His voice breaks as he says, "I couldn't stop it."

"Shh. It's okay," I whisper. He needs me, and being here for him is one thing I *can* offer. I can't do much right now. So much of my life and the war is out of my hands. But, I can comfort him.

After the night Draco gave me my wedding ring, I decided to dive head-first into our relationship. I spent the night as a wreck over the trauma of what happens in the future and how to reconcile my feelings. But, when the sun rose, I had a new resolve. The future is horrible in 2004. I don't want to go back. I want to stay in our penthouse with the version of my husband, who is sincere and caring. I have no idea what the motivations were of the Draco in the future, and I no longer care.

There is no guessing with *this* Draco. I don't have to wonder whether or not everything is a lie. He proves to me time and time again that he's an honorable man who just needs to feel love. We've spent the last month clinging to one another as if the entire wizarding world could fall apart as long as we were together. I dropped all my plans and scheming and decided instead to focus on what was right before me. This man. This wizard.

"I didn't — it wasn't me. Rookwood and Rowel tortured them. I couldn't do anything but watch if I didn't want to end up a target myself.' He growls the last part in anger. "Hermione, it was my aunt's husband. He was Muggle-born. Ted Tonks and some other guy, Creswell."

"Shh. You're here and safe. You didn't make that call."

Watching Draco come undone feels shocking. He almost always wears a mask of impenetrable calm. It protects him. But I see how much these assignments take out of him, and it causes me to burn with anger.

"Come on. Let's try to get some rest. It's late. I'll have Millie bring you a Dreamless Sleep."

"No!" he orders before placing me back on the stone hearth then guiding me towards the stairs. "I can't risk being knocked out like that. You're right. I need to sleep, but I won't take a sleeping draught. I need to be able to wake up if anything happens."

As I stare into his silver eyes, I see his swirling need to protect everything and everyone around him. It eats away at him more and more each day. The weight of the world is on his shoulders.

I turn and kiss him again softly, trying to calm his racing heart. Draco hugs me close and holds me for a few more moments then guides us upstairs and pushes open the door to our room. I watch as he pulls his shirt over his head and kicks off his shoes.

"Draco, nothing is going to happen tonight. The threat is gone. You're safe. I can keep watch. I'm pretty good at magic you know," I say with an upward turn to my lips. My magic is something that I've never had to second guess. It moves through my body with ease.

I walk to the closet to pull on a nightgown, but I feel him at my back before I finish. Draco is shirtless and pressed against me. He helps me slide the soft fabric over my body and then brushes my hair off my shoulder to kiss my neck.

"It's not me that I'm worried about." He lets out a sigh that causes me to shiver as his warm breath skates over my skin. "Hermione, we're hunting *Muggle-borns*."

His words hang in the air with everything he left unsaid. It takes my breath away.

"I'm okay, Draco," I whisper.

He turns me to face him and places another kiss on my forehead before threading our fingers together and drawing me to bed. Once I'm wrapped in his arms, buffeted by the feather pillows and warm duvet, his voice breaks the silence one last time.

"You're not to leave this house without my permission. Do you understand me?"

I don't say anything at first. He stopped warding the doors after giving me my new wand. It was a significant sign of his trust.

"Hermione," his tone is a warning.

"I understand."

The following day, I wake to find the bed cold and empty. My hand lays flat against the mattress where Draco's warm body should be. I shoot up and grab a robe from the closet before running downstairs to see what happened. It isn't like him to leave without letting me know first.

I pad down the steps in my bare feet and am just about to call for Millie when I see him sitting at the kitchen table near the tall stack of windows. I pull in a deep breath and slow my pace as I walk to meet him. Draco sits with a *Daily Prophet* in one hand and a mug in the other. He takes a long sip while reading, then hears me and turns.

"I woke early and didn't want to bother you," he says. "Here, want some breakfast? I asked Millie to leave some scones before I sent her off. I thought it would be nice to eat together in peace."

I continue towards him and say with a scowl, "That's sweet." When I stop at his side, we are almost the same height. I dip my head to kiss him, and our bond hums. The kitchen is warm from the morning sun. The touch of our lips causes my nipples to pebble, and gooseflesh rises over my skin as Draco runs his large hands under my robe and up my thigh. I moan but stop his advance, adding, "Don't worry me like that. I don't like wondering where you are."

"Sorry, love."

I pull out the chair across from him and make up a plate of strawberry scones and clotted cream. As I reach for the kettle, I notice Draco's eyes heat. He watches my robe fall open, exposing the fullness of my breasts. I slow my movements, bathing in his desire before retaking my place and letting my robe hang loose — more than what's considered decent.

"What time do you need to be in today?" I ask, pretending I don't notice the arousal pulsing around us.

Draco clears his throat and shifts in his chair to readjust his trousers as they tighten. "Not until this evening. Voldemort wants us for a war council meeting but didn't request me before that."

The mention of that sadistic bastard cools the mood for a moment. I take the opportunity to eat some of the scones. The buttery pastry and slightly sour fruit are a match made in heaven. I savor the taste and then wash it down with a sip of hot tea.

"Are you feeling better?" I ask.

He stares out the window for a moment before admitting, "It's hard to feel good right now. You know that. But, you do a good job of keeping me sane." He shifts his gaze to me and adds, "Honestly, Hermione. I don't know how I would've survived all this had you not dropped into my world. You're a godsend."

His words make my heart bloom with pride. Gods, I love this man. As he stares out the window again, I feel my body flush with heat. My dewy chest feels alight with the need to touch and be touched. I want to help him forget his troubles. I shake my shoulder, letting my robe fall a bit further. When Draco turns back to face me, the soft fabric is barely held up by the crest of my breasts and my straining peaks.

"Fuck, witch," He growls. "Come here."

Draco pushes back his chair as I follow his demand. When I reach him, I bend to suck gently on his neck, cooing, "I can make you feel good."

I slide down, pressing our bodies together as I go, and place my knees on the ground. Giving up all modesty, I let my robe and nightgown fall, exposing my right breast to him as I run my hands over his pants and pull him from his drawstring.

His weeping shaft pulses under my touch, begging for my mouth. I lick my lips, watching Draco below my lashes and mouth at the tip of his cock, lapping up his precum. Draco's eyes smolder as he presses his back into his chair and rolls his hips in pleasure. He needs distraction from the terrible tasks that Voldemort forces him to handle, and I need to express my appreciation for his love. It's pure and genuine. He loves *me*. Loves what I offer — my strength, my wit, my comfort. I've never felt more seen than I have over the past few months. Yes, I thought I felt real love before I awoke to the real world around me in 2004, but that was always tinged with a shadow of sadness. This love is true and deep.

I dip my hands further into his pants and cup his balls. I roll them gently between my fingers and tug just hard enough to pull a growl of ecstasy from Draco's lips. He threads his hand into my curls and pulls me toward his raging cock. I love the feel of his strong palm at the back of my head as he guides his cock past my lips, pushing me down to his base. I feel him brush the back of my throat and pay close attention to my gag reflex, steadying my breath to take him. He holds me there for a moment, watching me breathe slowly through my nose.

"Shh, that's it. Just a bit longer, love. You're a goddess."

My eyes roll in the back of my head as I wait for him to release me. It is hard to describe how right it feels to let this man control me. I brush aside all my complicated feelings about what that means for myself in the future and the horrible actions he takes and instead focus on the here and now. I worship the way my acquiescence to his demands drives him crazy.

After a few more seconds, Draco guides me up his shaft. As I go, I suck hard and lathe my tongue along the underside of his phallus. He pulls until my lips are encircling the tip of his head again. Then, he bounces back and forth, fucking my mouth and groaning. I soak up his arousal, pulling my cheeks in and humming on his rock-hard member as he drags me up and down, again and again. The sound is sloppy and explicit. It causes my knickers to drip. My clit throbs with the need to be touched, but not yet. Not yet.

Draco pulls me off of him. I catch my breath and lick his essence from my lips. I watch him purr, "You like when I fuck your mouth. Don't you?"

I nod. I'm transfixed by his voice.

He runs his thumb over my areola, and my breath catches as he ghosts over my stiff nipples. It causes a shiver to run down my back.

"Is your pussy wet for me?"

"Mmmhmm," I moan.

With a wave of his wand, he vanishes the table's contents and says, "Crawl up here and show me."

I stand on shaking legs and lean into him as he helps me onto the cold wood. His strong hands set me down, pushing me back and spreading my legs. He slides my panties down my legs, exposing me completely. I wait as he rubs the cotton between his fingers.

"These are soaked, love. You really do like sucking me off, don't you." He sits forward and places both hands on my inner thighs.

I take shallow breaths, waiting for him to touch me. I ache to feel him. I lay back and drape my forearm over my face. I'm in delicious agony, waiting for him to do as he wishes. It feels scandalous to be spread out before him, entirely under his command.

When his deft thumbs slide between my swollen lips and spread me wide, I nearly cum. Draco rubs his fingers through my slick cunt and over my tight bundle of nerves. A lightning bolt shoots through my body in response, and I suck in a fast breath. Then, it happens. I feel him dip his head and lap at my clit. Holy fuck, he feels good! I mewl in response and flatten my hands on the table. I'm laid out in front of him as he tastes me, sending me to that magnificent headspace I get to enjoy when the world around us dissolves to nothing. All that's left is Draco's expert tongue, my dripping sex, his raging cock, and this table.

I writhe in front of him as he holds my legs down and spreads me wide for his perfect ministrations. Draco runs his tongue over me once, twice, then leans forward and sucks. I yell out in pleasure as pinpricks of light fill my eyes. His slow and steady assault on my sex causes a torrent of pleasure to roll through me. I sink into the wood, arching my back and pressing myself down as I try not to thrust against his face.

Nothing on Earth feels as good as my husband's mouth on my clit. He knows exactly how to draw out my release. He circles and nips at me, adding the slightest pinch of pain and pleasure. As I yelp, he licks again, soothing me and sending spikes of ecstasy through me. He leaves one thumb at my clit, then moves his other hand lower and penetrates me with his thick fingers. One, then two, then, oh fuck, three. I start to mumble incoherently as he gives off an arrogant chuckle into my pussy. He knows what effect he has on me, and he loves it.

"You're close, love," he gloats. "I can feel you pulsing on my tongue." He's right, of course. I can't believe I've lasted this long, except I know I'm holding back, waiting for his permission. It makes my satisfaction even more incredible. All I need to do is hold out a little bit longer.

Draco pumps his fingers in and out of me while sucking my clit into his mouth. The intensity of his pull on my purest pinpoint of sensation is mind-numbing. The sound of his fingers squelching in and out of my body makes me hang over the precipice of my release. I'm waiting for him, he knows it. He's dragging it out until I almost can't wait any longer.

He places his broad palm on my lower abdomen, spreading his fingers wide and holding me down. Then, he leans in and continues his advance. He never speeds up but continues as I squirm, wrapping my legs around his head as he presses harder on my stomach and sucks.

He pulls back, blows cool air over my sex, and croons, "Let go, baby, I've got you," before lapping at me in the perfect rhythm to send me cascading over the edge. The torrent of release washes over me. I can't feel my body. I'm focused on his perfect lips, his mouth, his tongue. I'm lost to the waves of desire tearing through me again and again.

Then, suddenly, I'm cold. Draco stands and wipes his forearm over his mouth before slamming into me. It knocks the breath out of me and sends me over the edge again.

"Look at you. You're beautiful." He thrusts then groans before adding, "You're perfect cunt is swollen and tight. Fuck, I love taking you when you're wrecked like this." He rolls his hips, and I feel his hard, thick cock stretch my insides. My tits bounce with each thrust. I do nothing to stop them. I'm spent, still riding the aftershocks of my orgasm and reveling in the feel of him taking me.

Draco leans over me, holding his weight on his arm. He's grabbing the side of the table. I turn to see his forearm cording next to me. As I gaze at his lithe body, he pulls my left breast over my nightgown, watching with lecherous eyes as my full breasts roll with each push and pull in and out of my slit.

I push my arms together, gathering their weight and presenting my chest to him so he can rub his face through my deep cleavage. As he does, I feel him slow, and his movements stutter. His heavy sack tightens against my soaking pussy then he stills. Draco fists my breast and laps at my tit as he gushes inside me, rope after rope of hot cum. His breath slows, and he sucks for just a second longer, then collapses on top of me.

I'm pinned underneath him, staring upside down out the window and coming down from an intense climax. We breathe together for a bit. Air rushes in and out of our lungs in tandem while we hold each other.

After a long moment of silence, Draco stands. He pulls the sides of my robe over my breasts, tucking me back into place, and kisses me before pulling out.

"I love you," he says into my lips.

I nip at his bottom lip and respond, "I love you, too."

Days continue to pass with no sign of my trip back to the future — which is fine by me! When I first arrived, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to return to my time. Would I find a time-turner? Would the future Draco come and retrieve me somehow? Would I just vanish from this time and show up back at the Manor in 2004? However, these days, I don't like to think about that. It scares me.

Draco brings it up sometimes, but I try to evade him. I don't like to lie to him if I can avoid it, and we've come to an understanding of sorts. He doesn't ask, and I don't tell. But as time moves on, my stories start to fall apart.

"Hermione?" His deep voice breaks the silence as I'm just about to drift off to sleep.

"Hmm?" I'm warm and snug, tucked under his arm with my head on his bare chest.

Draco runs his hand over my hair, soothing me after another spectacular round of sex. "It's Spring."

I scrunch my eyes in an attempt to keep the cozy post-coital bliss. I don't want to think about what's to come.

"Yep."

"Voldemort hasn't sent me on any missions in a while."

"Mmhmm," I affirm again with a short response.

He shifts, causing me to sit up and scowl. "You're still here," he adds.

Being petulant, I continue to stare at him, dumbfounded, like I don't know what he means.

"I don't run into your younger self," he says, finally clarifying his point. "It's *you* and me. Just like it always has been. Like I *knew* it would be. I'm right, aren't I?" His eyes are bright and hopeful. " *We* bond on Grasmoor."

I see the hope in his expression, and no matter how much I want to believe this version of what happens, I can't. The reminder of the future causes me to freeze. Suddenly, memories flash through my mind.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I say into my pillow. I'm bone-weary, and I just want some peace and quiet,

"Hermione," he says, leaning over me with his hand on my back. "We both know that isn't true."

Draco tugs me forward and barks, "Let's go Mudblood! Get moving!"

"You love the Mudblood?" I hear the vicious monster jeer above me, but I lay still.

"Of course not, My Lord. Though it's easier to let her believe such," Draco's voice sounds over me. "—that way she fights less when I fuck her."

"Well, then Draco. Go on, that's sounds entertaining. Fuck her. I think the men here would like to see this famous Mudblood bitch put in her place."

It feels like I've been punched in the gut. "No!" I say, pushing away from him and rolling over. I stare at the wall as tears fall down my cheeks. I can't reconcile the fantastic man behind me with what he does to me in the future. It *can't* be that he does that to me after looking at me with such love in his gaze — such hope.

Draco growls as anger spikes between us. "I thought we were past all your lies!"

I don't respond; instead, I try to slow my anxious breathing and calm myself down.

I sniffle, and Draco hears me. He grabs my shoulder and forces me to turn and face him. "You're crying?" he says in shock.

"I'm not crying!" I snap back, wiping my face into my pillow to dry my tears. I shrug him off and head to the ensuite to catch my breath. Everything changed in an instant.

"Hermione, what the hell is going on!? I'm not asking you to tell me much. Just give me some hint. I need to know I'm on the right track. I can't imagine losing you now and starting over with someone else." He stands and starts to follow me, but I wave him off.

"Starting over with me!" I bark. It may be my younger version, but we're still talking about the same person.

"You know that's not true!!"

"Leave me be, Draco. God damn it! I need a minute, okay?"

He stops in his tracks and watches as I shut the bathroom door in his face. I head to the sink, turn on the faucet, and splash warm water over my face. I feel distraught. Part of the way I've found peace and happiness is by compartmentalizing my life. Being thrust back into those horrific memories causes me to shake with fear and anger.

I stay in the ensuite for a long time, trying to calm down. When it seems like I've been waiting for hours, I tip-toe out, hoping Draco gave up and fell asleep.

"Why the hell do I send you back in time? You've been gone eight months. How could I be away from you that long?"

No such luck.

Draco is staring out the window as he speaks. He waited for me.

I huff an angry sigh and warn, "I'm not talking about this."

I cross my arms and pop my hip, hoping to look serious. Draco spins around and orders, "Yes you are. I want to know what the fuck I just stepped into. Something isn't right."

I march to the walk-in to grab a robe. He follows me.

"Why are you so upset that I want to bond with *you*?" He stands in the doorway. I tie the robe belt around me as tight as I can and head back to the bedroom. He continues pressing me for answers, "What happens in the future to make me send you away?" He doesn't move, so I push at his chest in anger, still not responding. Frustrated, he growls, "What the fuck are you upset about? Talk to me damn it!"

I stomp through the room, deciding to sleep downstairs, something I haven't done in weeks.

As I go, Draco yells, "Hermione!"

I keep walking, slamming the door in my wake.

Chapter 17: Mudblood

Chapter Summary

If you want love, you gon' have to go through the pain
If you want love, you gon' have to learn how to change
If you want trust, you gon' have to give some away
If you want love, if you want love
-NF, If You Want Love

My fingers glide along the violin strings, producing a breathtaking aria. The high notes sing, and the low notes resonate with beauty as Draco sits on the couch beside me. The afternoon sun makes his silver eyes shine as he reads correspondences while I play. We shook off our argument from several weeks ago and are now back to our regular pattern of luxuriating in each other's presence.

That night, after I curled up in my bedroom downstairs, I ached with desperation to be back in Draco's arms. I knew that he didn't mean to set me off. His words were a salve to my weary heart. However, mentioning what happens to us in the future brought back too many raw memories. I hugged the covers under my chin and chided myself for holding him accountable for his future actions. The complicated situation made me bawl into my pillow until my salty tears ran out.

Thankfully, my door creaked open sometime past midnight. I watched with my back to him as Draco's tall figure darkened the doorway, throwing shadows on the wall before me. The sight caused me to heave a deep sigh of relief. I heard several heavy footfalls before cool air brushed my shoulders as he pulled back the heavy duvet and crawled in behind me. He wrapped me in his comfort and held me for a minute, letting our bond heal.

"I'm sorry. I'll drop it," Draco said in a deep, husky voice. He ran his hand up and down my arm, then kissed the top of my head.

My heart hurt from the memories that surfaced. I grieved over everything that I experienced in the future. But I needed Draco to know my anger wasn't because of him. I felt a lump in my throat, worried he might assume I didn't share his feelings. I rolled over and buried my face in his chest, whispering, "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have treated you like that."

"Shh," he soothed, gently resting his hand on the back of my head. He pulled me close to calm my nerves. "That's enough for now."

Since we were together again, the room seemed to hum with energy. I heard the gentle sounds of street music below and the fire still crackling in the living room. As tears pooled in

my eyes, I lifted my gaze to his. I needed him to hear my apology. "No, really, it wasn't about you—" I started, but he interrupted me.

"No more tonight, love." He grabbed my chin, holding me tenderly but making his point clear. "We need sleep." He paused, waiting for me to nod, then added, "But soon, you're going to tell me everything." He wiped the tears from my cheeks as he spoke, comforting me while insisting, "I know you're keeping things from me, and I'm not going to put up with that for much longer. Do you understand?"

My mouth flattened to a thin line, and I drew my eyebrows in as I nodded my agreement again. As we inched closer to the final battle, I knew I would need to come clean at some point. If I didn't head back to 2004 before then, I would be right in the middle of the moments everything started —the wedding *and* the accident. Knowing there was nothing else I could do about that and happy for Draco's return, I passed out in his arms, exhausted from the fight.

The following day, things were back to normal. The morning light woke me with its gentle warmth, causing me to stretch and yawn. As I did, my hips shimmied against my husband's large frame. Draco was still in my bed, wrapped around me. I rolled over to face him, and when I did, our eyes locked — silver and honey. We shared innumerable sentiments with each other while in that silent embrace. *I love you. I'm worried about you. I'm anxious about the future. I need us to survive, just as we are right now.* We both knew there was more to discuss, but we weren't keen on another row. So, instead, Draco kissed my forehead and hummed, "Good morning." The moment was tender and perfect.

Back in the music room, Draco says, "That's a nice one." He puts down his parchment and quill, staring at me with confusion as I play. "You memorized it?"

"I guess so," I shrug.

He sits up and leans on his knees, scrutinizing my expression. "It's pretty advanced. I know you're a quick learner, but —," he trails off.

I stop playing as my cheeks warm. I may as well start telling the truth now. Anxiety pools in my stomach as I drop the violin, holding it and the bow at my side. "About that...I, uh, lied to you." I stare at the floor and shuffle my feet, hoping that I'm making the right decision.

Draco raises an eyebrow at me.

"I just wanted to spend more time with you," I offer with a crooked smile. "I've played for years." Shifting my weight to my back foot, I stare at my fingernails in embarrassment. "I heard what you said the other night. I'll try to tell the truth about everything I can."

There's a beat of silence. I hold my breath, hoping that my honesty was a good idea. After a tense moment, Draco throws his hand to his face and rubs at his forehead, bemoaning, "Merlin's balls. I should've known." Watching him, I let out my breath, thanking the gods that he seems to appreciate the gesture. However, then he adds, "You were *so* bad."

"Hey!"

He wandlessly levitates the instrument from my hand and places it back on the stand. Then my smirking husband grabs my hand and pulls me into his lap. I squeal as I fall, laughing.

"It was out of character." He kisses my neck as he teases, "Usually, you're more adept at picking up new skills."

I'm so relieved that I squirm, grinning. Draco kisses me, then trails his lips down my neck again, saying, "Just like you learned many skills in our bedroom regarding how I prefer to take you." He lifts a hand to cuff my throat without putting any pressure on me but sending a current of heat to my sex as he alludes to our intimate power dynamics. His words start to do naughty things to my insides.

I shift on his lap as his hand falls away. Rolling my hips and kissing his jaw, I mewl, "I've known that for years, too." Draco groans. He pulls me in for a searing kiss just as Millie pushes open the door. Her little ears bounce as she enters, eyes focused on her hands, wiping them on her apron.

"Lunch be ready, Sir. and Mrs.," she says before realizing what she walked in on. Surprised, I trill a high-pitched laugh as I stand again. It's not like Millie hasn't seen us display affection before. Honestly, It would be hard to miss living with us. We're pretty nauseating. But I'm not interested in making her uncomfortable. Plus, lunch sounds excellent. We can get back to this conversation later.

Draco sighs and then stands as well. He straightens his clothes and runs a hand through his hair. "Thanks, Millie," he grumps.

Realizing what she interrupted, Millie drops her eyes and scuttles away. Her tiny feet patter down the hall as Draco wraps his arm around my waist, complaining, "She has rotten timing, that elf."

I continue laughing as I pull a sullen Draco to the kitchen for lunch. We eat a scrumptious meal of steak and caramelized onion salad with homemade croutons and a bacon vinaigrette. While we savor the food, making small talk, I stare out the window.

"The flowers are out."

Draco leans to scan the park below. Bright yellow daffodils line the paths that wind through the park.

I've been cooped up in the penthouse for almost three months now, so I take a sip of water and ask over the rim of my glass, "Want to go for a walk?"

"Not a chance." Draco's response is out of his mouth before I even finish talking.

"But you'll be with me," I reason. "We could disillusion ourselves."

Draco puts down his fork and repeats, "It's not happening, Hermione." He stares at me while irritation builds between us. My shoulders tense as I consider how this man, who is

technically younger than me, can command my attention and dictate my environment. Even in this time, Draco is confident in his authority. "It's too dangerous right now. I'm sorry."

"You get to go out," I whine without thinking. I stab at my salad as the air in the kitchen stills.

"*Get to?*" Draco's voice is suddenly cold.

Shit. That was idiotic. Of course, Draco would rather stay inside with me. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking. I didn't mean that," I backtrack and watch his shoulders relax.

He picks up his fork and starts eating again, saying, "It's okay. I know you're probably going stir-crazy." He reaches across the table to grab my hand, then rubs his thumb over my knuckles. "I'll ask Millie to go get some bulbs for you to tend inside. We can grow our own flowers."

After lunch, Draco mentions that he needs to get some work done. He leans to kiss my forehead and then makes his way to the office while I pour a cup of tea. The Twinning's warms my chest but doesn't hold my attention for long. So, I decide to make a custard with some of the Rhubarb that Millie pulled from the Manor gardens last week. I've been working on perfecting desserts. I stir together a flaky shortcrust pastry with cold, slow-churned butter, smiling at the results. I'm getting better!

The fire roars to life as I brush some flour off my face.

"Draco!"

A female voice yells, causing me to jump out of my skin, throwing white puffs of the sweet pastry into the air.

"Draco!!"

Is someone here!?

I dart my eyes around the kitchen, shaking dough from my hands. Sugar and butter fall to the cutting board while I try to find a place to hide. I hear the voice yell out again, and then my heart rate slows, remembering Draco warded the fire to ensure no one could get through and find me.

It must be a floo-call.

Regardless, I wait in the kitchen, out of sight, as Draco's heavy boots stomp down the hall. When he passes by, he narrows his eyes at me. Then, he drops his gaze with a pointed glare to where I'm standing near the sink, telling me without words to *stay put!* I know he doesn't want me to overhear his conversation, but he doesn't have time to shoo me away. It's clear that the caller is in distress.

"What is it, Mother?" he drawls, arriving at the hearth,

Draco's mom, Narcissa, is out of breath. He's told me a lot about her, but I've never heard her voice before — that I remember. Gods, I'm sick of that caveat.

I hear the fire pop and hiss as she answers, "You need to come quickly! We've caught them, but we have to be sure."

It's as if all the little sounds of the penthouse — the whooshing air through the ducts and the distant hums and vibrations of life — freeze in silence. Ice runs up my veins when I realize what day it must be. I've dreaded this event for a long time. I didn't know when to expect it would happen, only that it occurred around Easter. A pit grows in my stomach as I anticipate what's to come.

When Draco responds, it's as if someone cracked a whip in the air. "Caught who?" he asks with a clenched jaw. He's worried about what his Mother means, but I'm pretty sure he suspects correctly. I know the truth before she even responds.

Narcissa cheers, "Harry Potter!"

Here it comes.

I lean back, holding onto the porcelain sink behind me, as Draco shuts his eyes in anger. He's preparing himself for her next words.

"— he's with the youngest Weasley boy." Time slows even further as Draco tenses his shoulders for impact. "—and their Mudblood! Come quick!"

Draco drags in a heavy, steadying breath. His chest rises and falls as Narcissa's words confirm his fears.

"We need you to verify it's them before we summon the Dark Lord," she continues, oblivious to his distress. "Think of it, Draco. Everything could be forgiven! Please, hurry!"

Without opening his eyes, he spits, "I'll only be a moment."

The fire call ends with a sizzle of the logs. I bite my lip, awaiting his reaction. This is going to be bad. Draco's eyes shoot open, piercing me to the spot. He looks dangerous.

I'm still rooted to my place near the sink, anxious about what I know is going to happen. "W—we make it out okay," I whisper, stumbling over my words.

Draco storms to his study, leaving a trail of icy air in his wake. I wait with bated breath, stymied by my frustrating, limited mind. I wish I knew how to help this situation. My heart rattles at my ribcage, causing me to press a hand to my chest to stop it.

Draco returns a minute later, buttoning the sleeves of his Death Eater robe as he walks to meet me. "You better not be lying to me this time, Hermione," he demands.

"I'm not. I promise. I —" I try my best to comfort him. Remus said we escape. "We escape, I swear."

"If you're manipulating me again you will sorely regret it."

Draco must be terrified if he's making threats like that. His tone is harsh. I can see the stone-cold Death Eater who is used to barking orders and getting what he wants.

I wish I could get him to trust that everything will be okay. Except, I don't know that it will be. If the fact that I've messed with time doesn't impact what's about to happen, I still get tortured, even in the best-case scenario. I shudder to think what might occur if I've set in place an alternate reality. What if I don't survive? Could that be possible!?

I raise my hand to his broad chest to comfort him, but Draco brushes me off. Instead, he holds out his hand. "Give me your wand?"

"What? Why?" I'm stunned by his demand and miss the moment when he summons the magical lifeline from my back pocket. He fists it in mid-air. Draco worries that I might do something idiotic, so he doesn't want to leave me with access to magic while he's away. He can't let himself worry about two of me at once.

"Draco!" I yell out, but he's unphased.

"Are you hurt?"

I see his mask of sheer anger. This is my husband's worst nightmare. Draco doesn't know what he's walking into, and I can't bring myself to tell him.

"We escape," I repeat, evading his question. It's no use, though, as he catches the unspoken lie. "Please, can I have my wand? I won't do anything."

Draco turns away from me, headed to the fire.

"You're right. You *won't*," he says over his shoulder with furious resolve. I follow in his wake. "You can have your wand back when this is over." He shoves it into his pocket and asks, "How can I help you?"

I rub at the back of my neck and shuffle my feet. What did Remus say? I don't remember. "You can, uh, you," His Mother said something about verifying that it was Harry. "You can claim it isn't Harry!" I say, hoping that I'm right. "Just tell them you aren't sure!"

Draco nods. He straightens his robe, then grabs my cheeks in both hands, slamming our lips together. We both feel the weight of this moment with acute intensity. I move my soft lips over his, trying to convey that everything will be okay.

He turns to leave, and I try to reassure him one last time. "It's going to be okay—"

"Don't you dare say that again!" Draco whips around and yells, "You and I both know that we've been fucking around with time!!!"

"No, we haven't changed anything important it will —"

Draco orders, "You will not leave this penthouse!" He throws a ward to the main door for good measure. "I mean it, Hermione! Do not test me!"

"I won't. I promise." I kiss him one last time and watch him step through the green flames.

I stand before the fire, trying to take in everything that just happened. An hour ago, we were laughing together on the couch. My arms shake as thoughts spin in my head.

A minute passes.

Five.

Ten.

I'm shaking with fear over what I know is about to happen. Draco's sadistic aunt tortures my younger self. There's a fight, and then we Apparate away. Remus said this happened right before we stayed with Bill Weasley. He didn't elaborate other than to tell me that I'm hurt, but I recover with the help of Bill's wife, Fleur.

I have to trust that I end up okay and that we haven't drastically changed time. But the thought of my younger self being scared and hurt gnaws at my insides.

I approach the flames and stretch my hand to feel their heat. She's just on the other side of this fire. The woman I've tried to recall. The sense of myself I've been desperate to meet is just a pinch of Floo-powder away. I moan, knowing that the answers to all of my questions are within my grasp, but I still can't reach them.

Like always.

I pull my hands from the fire and rub their warmth over my arms. All that matters right now is that my younger self survives. I can find out more answers later. Today, I just need to stay safe.

I'm okay. Draco went to —

The floor seems to drop out from beneath my feet as I realize the full extent of what's going on. How could I have been so blind!!

Draco went to the Manor!

Fuck!!

What if he outs himself? He was so upset he is going to make mistakes. Someone could notice and use that information to harm him. Regardless, he will be stuck in the middle of the fight!

Remus never mentioned what happened to the Malfoys!

My skin crawls as I realize this fact. My breath catches in my throat, and suddenly, I'm destroyed with anxiety. This whole time, I've been focused on what happens to me. I knew about my injuries and tried my best to distract myself from thinking about how this all plays out. It's only now that I realize Draco just left to put his life at risk!

Terrified, I dip into our bond to check in on him. Closing my eyes, I feel anger, anxiety, and resolve.

He's going to try to save me! Oh shit!

"Millie!" I yell out for her help.

"Yes, Mrs?" she asks, appearing next to me with a *Pop!*

She doesn't meet my gaze. She must've overheard what's going on and is now worried. Her expression tells me Draco didn't have time to give her any orders.

I can use that to my advantage, but I still don't know what to do. There's no game plan. All I know is that I have to try to help him. Maybe being near the action will jolt my memories. In my urgent need to help, I'm woefully ignoring the fact that I've never been able to recover any memories.

However, if I can get to the Manor and remain unseen, I could help from behind the scenes.

"Take me to Malfoy Manor!" I say with authority.

Millie shrinks in on herself. Her little arms shake as she shifts her weight back and forth on her tiny feet. I don't have time for her indecision. I'm not going to sit here and hope for the best. No one ever watches out for Draco! I growl in frustration, waiting for her to agree.

"Master wouldn't —"

"Millie!" I spit. "I am giving you an order! Take me to Malfoy Manor right now!"

She starts wringing her hands and humming a worried song, trying her best to avoid the directive. She knows Draco would disapprove, but I can tell from how she is fighting my demand that he never explicitly told her not to bring me back to the Manor. Why would he? Of course, I wouldn't ask to return there —until now. Her eyes are closed, and she paces, trying to resist.

"Millie is a free elf!" She whispers to herself, balling her wrinkled fists at her sides. "Millie doesn't need to—"

"MILLIE!" I yell, causing her frail arm to jut out in a knee-jerk response. She grabs my hand, and suddenly I'm flung into swirling darkness.

We land in the spare room on the third floor, *my room*. It's dark and cold, but I barely notice. When my feet hit the ground, I start for the door with Millie at my heels.

"Mrs. will not put herself at danger!" Millie snarls, grabbing onto my shirt.

She's small but mighty, and her attempt to slow me works for a second. "Get off!" I sneer, shaking her off my shirt and heading out the door. I run down the hall as quietly as I can manage. Behind me, I hear Millie growl. Glancing over my shoulder, I see her huff out a silent exploitive to the ceiling, then stomp her feet and run after me. She's furious. I've never seen Millie like this before. Despite herself, she casts a silencing charm as I run to help keep me safe. It warms my heart. I'll need to thank her later.

When I reach the sweeping staircase to the atrium below, I crouch by the stone pillars, shushing the angry elf at my heels and motioning for her to join me. Millie seems about to burst, but she follows my suggestion while casting some charm around us, then sneering, "Mrs. will not put herself in danger!"

"Listen, Millie," I say, taking her small hand and imploring, "I need to be here to make sure that Master Draco is okay." At that statement, her eyes open wide in shock. "I love him. You do, too. I know it!" I shake her hands, emphasizing my words. Millie nods. "No one watches out for him!" I hiss. Her eyes darken. She knows I'm telling the truth and shares my anger. Yes! "But you and I can! We can keep him safe. Help me!"

There is a long silence, but something changes in her expression. She knows that I'm right. She has witnessed how Draco suffers in silence—the dangerous tasks he's charged with, the people who treat him like shit. She considers what I said for a second longer, then purses her lips, furrows her brows in determination, and nods. "Okay," she squeaks. "I use my magic to keep both you safe!"

"Thank you!" I cry, bending to hug her.

Suddenly, anxious voices echo within the tall ceilings.

"Wait! All except for the Mudblood."

"No! You can have me! Keep me!"

I strain my ears to hear what's going on. I can't see anyone from this angle, but the voice sounds like an older woman and a younger man. Bellatrix Lestrange and Harry Potter? Or maybe Ron Weasley? I crawl down a few steps, trying to get close. Millie follows. I can't see Draco in the room anywhere, so I check in with the bond. He's outside by the gates. Odd.

Standing in the center of the atrium, I see what must be Draco's parents and aunt, a foul-looking man, a tangle of wizards tied together with magical bindings, and...

"If she dies under questioning, I'll take you next! Blood Traitor is next to Mudblood in my book. Take them downstairs, Greyback! And make sure they are secure but do nothing more to them yet!" the dark-haired woman cackles.

There is a lot of movement. The horrid man drags who I assume are Harry, Ron, and a few others away. It's my first glance at my former friends in real life. I try to imprint their faces into my memory. Red and black hair, one taller, one who looks like he's been hit with some jinx. Watching them go, I realize I never thought much about the Manor dungeons. It sends a chill up my spine.

Everyone walks away, and I see a woman tied up and sitting near the fire. Her curls cascade down her back, and I watch her shake with fear.

It's me.

I've been curious about my former self for as long as I can remember. I've yearned to reconnect with her and find my way back to who I was. I've ached to know everything that she knows. This moment feels surreal.

I could grab her and Apparate back home. She'd be safe and wouldn't need to stay long. A day or two, maybe three. Just long enough for her to tell me everything.

I watch her wondering what her favorite color is, whether she likes chocolate or vanilla best — if she has ever loved anyone.

But I can't whisk her away. Draco is right. We've already messed with time too much. That type of change would be colossal. She wouldn't be here to be tortured, but Harry and Ron might go crazy wondering where she went or what happened to her. They might not Apparate to Bill Weasley's. They might stay and continue to fight.

No, I can't stop this from happening. I can't gain more information.

I sit back on the step and try to catch my shuttered breath as I take it all in. A tear streams down my cheek, causing Millie to approach and wipe it away with a sad, curious expression. She sees through me. My little elf friend knows that something is wrong with my reaction.

Everyone else left the hall. I think I heard Bellatrix say something about going to get a knife. Draco hasn't returned, and there is no sound of a struggle. I check in with the bond again. He's still furious and anxious, but I don't sense any active threat.

Everything seems eerily quiet as my younger self awaits Bellatrix's return.

I hear a small whimper. It echoes around the towering walls. The sound guts me. I look so lost and afraid. I watch as the woman in front of me darts her eyes around the room, looking for any escape. She is twisting and turning, trying to loosen the bonds.

I feel an agonizing need to save her. I can't imagine being here, crouching behind the railing while I let my younger self get tortured. But that's what happens. I know it does.

With Draco seemingly safe, I change my course of action. I'm overcome with the need to intervene. Suddenly, a crazed idea occurs to me.

"Millie, I can't run through the Manor," I lie. "You can! They won't question you. Go, please! Find Draco and make sure he's safe. I'll stay here."

"Yes! Mrs. that is a good idea. You stay right here! I will be back!" The elf looks very pleased with this turn of events. She is almost bouncing with relief.

"But wait, first, can you remove her chains?"

Millie examines the younger Hermione, then turns to face me again, saying, "Those are wizard's chains. Anyone can take them off if they aren't the one ensnared." She stares at me for a moment and then asks, "Do you want me to let her free as I go?" Millie sounds nervous at the thought.

"No, um, nevermind. Go, make sure Draco's okay. I'm worried about him. We can't save her. It's too dangerous." I cast my eyes downward, hoping to look convincing.

She nods at me to indicate her approval, then says, "Yous stay!" before I throw my arms around her little frame. Millie hugs me back, stiff at first but then leaning into me. We hold each other for a beat, and then she pulls back and Apparates away.

I know there's very little time. Without thinking, I race down the rest of the steps and skid to a stop before my younger self. Laws of time travel be damned!

"What the!" Younger Hermione yelps.

I shush her, cautioning, "Shh, there isn't much time! Think about it, Hermione. I'm not an aberration! I'm from the future. You know time travel is possible!"

I thank the gods that Remus mentioned my earlier use of time travel. It makes this introduction much easier.

Hermione looks shocked. She leans back, trying to scoot away from me, but I plead, "Please understand!" I watch as my younger self moves from fear to comprehension, back to fear in seconds. She scans the doors with apprehension, knowing how dangerous this meeting is.

Thank Merlin, she believes me!

I untie the ropes and hasten to explain, "I can't watch it happen. You need to go hide! I can handle Bellatrix."

Hermione's wearing a heavy gray peacoat with a light grey sweater beneath it. I'm in a long-sleeved white shirt with a v-neck. But we are both wearing jeans!

"What?! No!"

She protests, but I ignore her. I start fumbling with her buttons, trying to remove her jacket. Luckily, she's still stunned, so that I can pry the coat from her.

"Listen! I've been here before," I lie. "This is how it happens. Trust me."

"No! You can't take my place. I don't want you to get hurt either!"

I throw the coat on and pull my hair from beneath it. I shift to replace her and push her towards the stairs where I was hiding.

"Look, you don't have a choice!" I snap. "This is how it happens, and you know it's too risky to mess with time!"

Irritation skates up my back. Why won't she hide!? She is forcing me to beg to be tortured. Just go!

She's conflicted, in shock, stumbling towards the steps. I sigh in relief as I fist the ropes, tucking them around me but not locking myself up. Air moves through my lungs in quick succession. I'm manic with determination, so focused that I don't notice Draco's shift in mood. Hermione is almost back to my hiding spot, but she stops. I groan.

"Wait, please —" she looks like she is warring with herself. "—do we beat him?"

I can tell she knows that she shouldn't ask, but she can't stop herself.

"Yes," I say. I can't bring myself to share the truth. It would crush her.

Her face brightens. "We find and destroy all seven Horcruxes!?" She's elated.

The what??

"Yes," I nod, staring at my shaking hands. I don't know what she's talking about. Any moment now, Draco's aunt is coming back. I'm preparing myself for the terrible scene to come.

Hermione leans in, scanning the doors one more time, then whispers, "Even Harry?"

I'm completely lost. "Uh, yeah."

"I was right," she says, looking grief-stricken and staring forward with unfocused eyes. "He *was* one."

Several emotions shoot through me. Shit! Draco knows I'm here. I don't know if he felt my presence or Millie told him, but I feel a flash of fury mixed with terror. He's coming.

"Were the Deathly Hollows a part of it at all?"

I don't know why she is still talking. Go! Get behind the railing and out of sight!

I roll my lips and nod, raising my eyebrows but trying to look convincing. Then I shoo her away. "Now, go!"

She looks shocked at my answer but then shakes it off, wrapping me in her arms. I smell campfire smoke and earth. Her face is dirty, and her clothes are torn. I want to absorb her into me and meld us together as one. My despair is palpable.

"Thank you," she whispers. Then she hesitates one last time. "Are you sure this is how it happens??"

"Yes! Don't worry about me. I took a pain potion. I won't even feel anything."

I'm sure, but I'm terrified. I've never been more certain of anything in my life. I ache for what I know this young woman will experience — all the pain and confusion. I'm a warrior. I've

been through the trenches and back. I can take anything, I tell myself, willing it to be true. I'll do it if I can save this woman from any part of her upcoming trauma. No questions asked.

She starts toward the stairs again. I watch as she bends to hide. At the same time, I hear people approaching, clacking heels and quick, heavy footsteps—their noise clangs around the walls.

"Wait!" I yell out in a heavy whisper. I need to say this quickly.

Hermione turns around. Anxiety burns in her eyes.

"Whatever you do, trust Draco!"

Just as Bellatrix rounds the corner, Draco races into view. I see him grab the edge of the door in anguish, stilling his movements. He's wrecked.

Bellatrix stares at me, then curls her lips and shrieks, "You're going to pay for breaking into my vault, Mudblood!"

Chapter 18: The Brand

Chapter Summary

"Hold, hold on, hold onto me
'Cause I'm a little unsteady
A little unsteady
Hold, hold on, hold onto me
'Cause I'm a little unsteady
A little unsteady"
-Unsteady, X Ambassadors

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains torture. Be warned.

Everything hurts.

I clench my eyes, trying to ward off the venom crawling up my arm, but it does nothing to ease my pain. My screams echo around the room. I'm begging this sadistic witch to stop — she laughs in response.

Bellatrix's clammy talons are wrapped around my forearm, holding me down while her silver knife slices into my flesh. It's imbued with dark magic. It has to be. This is too horrific. *Help!*

"AHHHHHH!!!! STOP!! PLEASE..." I screech, choking on my tears.

"I'm going to ask you again. Where did you get this sword? *Where?*"

The evil woman's foul breath warms my neck as she sneers.

"We found it — we found it — *PLEASE!*"

I'm responding with nonsense. I have no idea what fucking sword she's talking about or why it matters. I make up anything I can to get her to stop.

Bellatrix growls in frustration, then leans over me again to continue her torturous carving. I'm reduced to whimpers and murmuring in between unintelligible wails.

Make it stop! Make it stopmake itstop!! *Makeitstopstopstopmakeitstop!!!!!!*

As I thrash around on the floor, I barely recognize footsteps, but then the pain lets up for a second as I hear a deep voice.

"Aunt Bella—"

Her irritation at being interrupted is palpable, but it gives me a second to roll to my side and hug my arm to my chest. I can't catch my breath. I can't breathe!

"I secured the snatchers outside and wiped their memories."

I gasp as the pain leeches from my throat, allowing me to pull a tight, quick breath—aftershocks of the attack pulse along my limbs. My arm feels necrotic like it's rotting away. I can't look. Sweat and tears stream down my face as I bawl. My head pounds, and there's a piercing shriek in my ears.

Above me, the man sounds clipped, like he's raging on the inside but trying not to let it show. "They won't be an issue."

There's a white-hot edge of seething malice and terror just below my rib cage that doesn't feel altogether like my own. It belongs to—. I can't think straight. It hurts. Everything hurts. I attempt to pull my arm away while she's distracted. I tug, but my strength is gone, and it only causes her to clamp down harder.

Please be finished, *please*. Please leave me. Walk away with the man, go away, go away.
Please!

Cracking my eyes, I try to determine if the attack will start again. I worry that she isn't done yet. I notice that there's a set of black boots by my face. I've seen them before.

Heaving great, heavy sobs, I lift my gaze to catch Bellatrix staring up at the man. Her expression is crazed. Tears cloud my vision, and my body feels like lead. I flop back against the cold stone and try to steady my breathing.

"Thank you, nephew," She spits. "Now *get out!* You have no idea how bad this situation might become. I'm going to make this disgusting trash pay. She needs to talk!"

No, no, no, nonononono!!! Oh, gods, *no!*

Every muscle in my body tenses as I brace myself for the next attack. It causes shards of pain to shoot through my shoulders. Despite my hysteria, I notice the man's wand at his back. In a move so small and quick that it would be easy to miss, he flicks it at me, then stalks away.

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A wave of magic washes over me. There's a sudden release of tension. My mind wipes clean of the horrors I'm experiencing and instead feels blank and empty.

I sigh. The pressure from my shoulders lessens as I stare at the ornate ceiling above me. I see creams and gold in intricate patterns. How lovely. The grumpy lady continues scratching at my arm while I yell.

Her weight presses into me as dread pools in my stomach. Something is very, very wrong, but I can't stop it. I'm controlled by this voice in my head saying, *Lay still, god damn it! Don't feel it. Don't feel. Fuck! Don't feel!*

I try to listen to the voice, but it's hard. The curly-haired witch is doing something horrible. However, now my brain doesn't signal a threat — just emptiness. I'll lay still and ignore the searing torture. It's fine. I'm fine.

I wonder when she'll stop. Will she stop? *Lay still. Don't feel.*

"What else did you take, what else? *ANSWER ME! CRUCIO!*"

"AHHHHH!!!!!!!"

My head lulls forward as I jolt awake. My body is electrified with pain. It knocks the breath out of me as I come to, sputtering for air.

She's holding me now — the mean lady. Tremors lick along my body. Something happened. Something bad. *Don't feel.*

People are standing around the room, frozen in place. They're all staring. Hmmm, why? That's strange. Red hair. Black. The man with silver eyes looks gutted. His heart beats a thousand miles a minute, but his expression is stone. His eyes, though, speak volumes with the way they shake with terrified anger.

I think the mean witch is holding her knife to my neck.

"Cissy, I think we ought to tie these little heroes up again, while Greyback takes care of Miss Mudblood."

Darkness.

I flop my head against my chest again. It takes too much effort to hold it up. This is better. *Don't feel.*

CRASH!!!!!!

The loud, tinkling noise shocks me awake again. I'm falling. It hurts. *Don't feel.* I should stop myself from hitting the ground. Yes, that's a good idea. But, *Lay still* —

Firm hands grasp my shoulders. I'm pressed against a broad chest as someone lugs me toward the stairs. Screams wrench from others in the room. There's clanging and glass shattering. *Don't* —

Silver eyes. Mad eyes.

A beautiful, angry man is in front of me; his face is cut, and he's yelling out a scathing demand to someone. The scene plays out as if it's muted. I only understand glimpses of what's going on. It's chaos, the beautiful man is furious, and I'm hurt — empty.

I touch my chest and drop my gaze to my hand, shocked. There's an anxious, desperate, furious weight on my heart.

"Get her out of here!! NOW!!!"

I close my eyes again as small hands grab my wrist, and we float away.

Dreams plague me while I sleep. Happy flashes of Draco holding me by the fire. We're safe and warm in our home with no threat. I pull a deep breath in my slumber, then cringe at the pain that shoots through my back. The blissful moment disappears.

Voices break through my haze of confusion, waking me from my restless sleep.

"WHAT THE FUCK WERE YOU *THINKING*!?"

"I is sorry, Master!" a squeaky voice wails, "She lied to me — she said—"

There is a bang and a crash, another yell, and then I succumb to oblivion again.

As I toss in the sheets, a nightmare emerges. I'm standing in our bedroom. Draco is by the window, and his expression is stern.

"Give me my wand!" I demand. "Our marriage is over. I'll take my chances on the streets. I'm leaving you."

"You can try," Draco says with icy precision.

And so it continues. My sweat-soaked body twists and turns in the linen, flipping between peaceful moments and terrifying memories. I call out in pain a few times, waking from my nightmares as I feel someone dab my arm with a potion. The agony creeps in again as they hasten to wrap me back in a thick bandage.

When I'm half awake, I hear someone crying. The voice is small, but it's clear they're quite upset.

I'm hot. My skin feels like it's burning, and my breathing is tight and quick. I become even more restless as I try to squirm away from the discomfort in my sleep. As I moan, I think I hear voices, but I can't make sense of them.

"Sir. The fever won't be letting up!"

"Keep dosing her with the cooling charms and don't let her get too dehydrated. I'll go secure a stronger restorative draught."

"Okay, thank you—"

"Millie, you better pray to your gods that she wakes up unhurt." The deeper voice sounds pained and livid.

Heat, pain, discomfort. Then blessed blackness.

I crack open my eyes and squint at the brightness in the room. Everything is blurry, so I blink a few times to provide relief for my dry eyes.

When I've had a moment to catch my breath and I can handle the light, I take in my surroundings. Without lifting my head yet, I can see that I'm back at home in our penthouse. I'm lying in my bedroom, and I'm alone.

Wait, no. I hear a snuffle.

"Millie?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the little elf hopping off a nearby stool and trudging over to me. Tear tracks mar her usually friendly face. She picks up a cloth, wiping my forehead as she assesses my condition. I watch her sniff a few times. She avoids eye contact.

"I'm okay. Please, let me sit up."

"Mrs. Is *not* okay!" She snaps.

I pull back, furrowing my brows at her tone. She sounds pissed.

"Mrs. Is a bad witch!"

"Woah," I say, sitting up and throwing my legs over the edge of the bed. "I'm not awake enough yet for your attitude." Everything comes rushing back to me as I scrub my hands over my face to brush away my grogginess.

I'm safe. I made it out okay. But the memory of Draco's gutted expression just before Bellatrix started torturing me causes me to feel intense sadness. What did I do? Gods.

"I'm sorry, Millie. But, I needed to —"

My head feels woozy as I lean on my knees to brace myself. There's a massive bandage on my right arm.

"Yous a liar! Yous said you'd stay put. Yous said you wanted to make sure *Master Draco* was okay! Tricked Millie!"

She takes my bandaged arm in her little hands, unwrapping the gauze with more force than necessary. She can't make me feel worse than I already do. I don't regret saving my younger self from that torture, but I feel deep remorse for the grief and anxiety that I caused Millie and Draco.

"Look away!" She barks when she catches me watching. "I don't want you passing out again." She starts redressing my wound, muttering *Mrs. Is a bad witch* under her breath, holding back tears as she works.

Sensing this is not the moment to push her further, I obey. Instead of talking, I scan the rest of my surroundings as she tugs and pulls. Everything looks the same. There's no sign of Draco anywhere. When this happened before, blankets, books, and cold tea in saucers told me he had kept watch.

Something sharp and painful dabs at my skin, causing me to clench my teeth and pull in a quick breath. I turn to see what happened, but Millie scowls at me, then shields her work with her little frame.

"I'm sorry, Millie. I didn't intend to lie to you. I just—" My voice cracks. I whisper, "I couldn't watch it happen."

She finishes and glowers at me with a tear-soaked hiccup. Her bottom lip juts out as she talks. "Mrs. Got herself hurt — Master Draco hurt — and Dobby—!"

She emphasizes each point so that I understand the magnitude of what occurred. Fear seeps into my chest as I scan the bond to see if I can determine Draco's condition. He isn't home, and he isn't in pain. I take a deep breath.

"What happened to Draco? I remember seeing him. His— face was cut." I try to recall everything, but it's hazy. "But, he didn't look too hurt."

She marches away.

"Millie!?"

I need to know that he is okay. The elf spins around and spits. "Master Draco be bleeding and terrified. He furious with you *and* me! He in pain, worried about you!" She throws her arms in the air, crying, "Then the dark wizard hurts him!"

Shit.

"But, he's okay?" My voice is small when I ask her. I need to know. I can't stand the thought of Draco being hurt for my actions. The rational side of my brain understands that the events at Malfoy Manor were always going to happen, but I feel intense guilt for my part in his punishment.

"He is recovered now, physically." She vanishes the used bandages and crosses her arms, resting her weight on one hip. "But he is *not* okay."

I need to see him. "Where is he? When will he be home?"

"I don't know!" she snaps. "I is told to stay with you at all hours, not leave your side." She's so angry it's shocking to witness. Millie often seems so unflappable. "And I is mad at you!"

I want to change the subject. I have to think about something else. "And Dobby? Is he a friend of yours? What happened to him?"

Millie's eyes well up. She growls at me and hurries away.

I scowl, watching her leave. Her duties must be over now that I'm awake, I realize. It's best to let her go cool down. My chest feels heavy, considering how everything played out. I'm sure talking with Draco about it will be a nightmare. It's hard to see Millie so upset.

I sit on the edge of the bed for a few more minutes in pained reflection. Flashes of Draco's expression at the Manor cause me to rub my hands over my forehead. I'm trying to wipe away some of my penetrating shame.

After another breath, I make my way to the bathroom to wash off. I've done this dance before. I'm unsure how many days I was out, but it was probably a few. I can tell, as usual, from the way my body calls to Draco's.

I push that realization aside and dress in a pair of leggings and one of Draco's sweaters. Then I head to the kitchen to find food. I wrap myself in the oversized sleeves of his jumper, trying to draw comfort from them as I go. The penthouse is quiet. Millie ran off, and I'm all alone with my thoughts, which is a place I would rather not be right now. There's too much to process.

Draco still hasn't returned when I've nibbled on some dry toast and washed it down with orange juice. So, not knowing what else to do, I head to the living room to find a book. I'm not sure when Draco will be back, and I need something to distract my racing thoughts.

However, sitting on the coffee table, beside where I left my recent novel, rests a Pensive and a note.

See for yourself.

The pit grows in my stomach. I stare at the swirling memories as guilt enrobes me like a weighted blanket.

This is a punishment.

Draco wants me to see what happened from his perspective. I recoil at first, not wanting to revisit the traumatic events, but then curiosity wins out. I only have pieces of the picture. I was so delirious. I recall that in my pained and panicked frenzy, I couldn't even recognize that Draco was there with me. I remember seeing *a man* but not putting together the fact that my grief-stricken bonded partner was standing over me, helpless, watching his aunt torture me and knowing that I chose it.

Ugh, this is going to be rough.

Resigned, I plop down on the couch, take a deep breath, and dip my face into the basin of memories.

The scene develops before me. When the mist of forming memories steadies, I find myself standing on the Manor grounds. Draco is near the gate. He looks cold and ruthless as he points his wand in the face of some grubby-looking wizards, each in turn wiping their memories.

I'm not sure who these men are. I didn't see them in the Manor, but judging from their hardened, shabby look, I assume they're criminals. Scouts for Voldemort?

I can sense Draco's mood. The bond is strong, even through the memory. He's anxious, but he's hopeful, too, like he thinks the threat might be over.

I sigh, knowing how wrong he is. Watching him, I hug my arms to my chest. The early spring air is cool. It matches my mood. I drop my gaze and kick at the garden path. It's frustrating to watch from the sidelines as these events take place again. I'm helpless to do anything. What's done is done now. In this memory, I have no control over the outcome.

The wind whips Draco's hair as he straightens, then catches sight of Millie running down the path to him. She looks pleased to find him safe, but her presence causes Draco to throw his hand to his chest and his eyes to blow wide in terror. I sense it—the moment he realizes I lied to him. The sharp mix of fury and agony he experiences as he learns that I'm at the Manor and in danger.

"Master, I is here to help!" Millie squeaks, oblivious. But Draco takes off running, blowing past her.

As he passes me, I hold my hand out to feel the energy he leaves in his wake. I want to comfort him, but I know I can't.

The memory morphs into another scene, and I find myself in a dark hall. Draco races by as I drop my face to the ground. I don't want to follow him. I see his tortured expression when he stops in the doorway and catches sight of me. It hurts my soul. His fear and desperation eat away at him. The grief is suffocating.

I sense his need to save me and his anxiety, recognizing how dangerous this situation is for everyone involved. He takes a deep breath to calm himself as my screams ring out. Then he slowly enters the room.

I follow, keeping my eyes on the ceiling. I only take quick glances at what's happening on the floor. When I do, I notice my body writhing in pain. It causes bile to rise in my throat. I can't comprehend the whole meaning of the memory from Draco's perspective because I'm thrust back into the pain, remembering how horrific it was. I had no way of understanding what a sacrifice I was making when I made my rash decision to take the brunt of Bellatrix's wrath.

Torture, injured, hurt they're such odd words in the abstract. It's only possible to understand their weight once you experience their intensity.

I don't regret it. I fold my arms and huff, still averting my gaze. I'm glad that I saved my younger self from the tragedy. But still, my ears ring as I stand here paying witness to what I subjected myself to.

Draco walks to his aunt and stands over my pathetic form as he interrupts.

Remembering, I turn my gaze to the stairwell. I can't see anyone hiding there. The realization causes me to let out a stuttered breath of relief. I take a few steps to my left, towards the wall, and notice my younger self come into view. Her expression causes me to shake with misery.

Hermione is crouched below the railing, holding her head between her knees. Her hands are over her ears, and her eyes are scrunched. She's attempting to ward off the sounds of my torture as she rocks back and forth.

As if turning up the volume, suddenly, I'm able to take in the source of the wailing and screaming. I turn with my eyes closed at first, only opening them a tiny slit. On the floor, I'm hollering out in agony. I see my arm pinned to the ground by Bellatrix and catch red, mottled blood.

That's when I see it. Draco flicks his wand at me from behind his back. I narrow my eyes, paying close attention, remembering that he cast some spell to mute my torment. It felt familiar. I close my eyes, trying to recall where I experienced that sensation before.

Not wanting to watch, I sit next to the younger Hermione on the steps. I throw my arms over her shoulders and hold her — protecting her from this trauma, too.

The scene plays out. Bellatrix Crucios me, then orders Draco to find a goblin? In the memory, my body lies lifeless after the spelled attack. I see Draco come in and feel his torment upon finding me passed out.

Harry and Ron eventually run in, and there's a standoff as Bellatrix grabs my limp body, threatening my life.

Draco's distress claws at him. He stands near his parents, watching with a sharp, possessive need to protect me.

That's when I hear it—a high-pitched squeal, like metal churning. I look up to see an elf clutching the chain on the giant chandelier. A moment later, it's falling, and chaos follows. Draco seizes on the opportunity. He lunges for me, races to the steps in the melee, and fists the collar of young Hermione. Then he chucks her into the mess of glass and confusion.

I stand back, watching as he leans over my prone form from the memory as my head bobs. I'm fighting to stay conscious. Draco yells, trying to keep me awake. Then he snaps at Millie to bring me home. I see her run down the steps behind us. She grabs my arm, and we disappear.

When the memories end, I lift from the Pensive and stare at the wall for several long minutes. Experiencing the torture was inexplicably awful. It guts me just thinking about it, but Draco was tormented as well. He had to watch it all, helpless, trying his best to intervene where he could.

I'm tired again, exhausted from watching the memories. I head down the hall on shaky legs, arriving in my room. I don't know what to do with myself. I lift my arm to push my hair out of my face and notice the bandage.

Time stops.

My heart hammers as I slowly pull at the wrappings. They twist and fall away. When they're gone, I see it.

Snarled, ugly lines, puffy and infected looking. Jagged, crude.

Mudblood

In a daze, I walk to my dresser and pick up the photo of Draco and me on Grasmoor. I need him to come home so that we can comfort each other. I run my fingers along the edge of the photo in an attempt to get closer to him. The photographic representations of us stare back at me, looking sad.

I gently touch the mark on the photo version of Draco's temple, realizing that he probably now wears the scar I was used to seeing on him in the future. It's just over his eye.

Next to him in the photo, my likeness pulls her arm from behind Draco's back. I've never seen her do this in the photo before. She always kept it tucked behind Draco. But now, the little version of myself holds the underside of her arm up so I can see. There's tears in both of our eyes as I read the letters inscribed in her flesh.

It's true, then. We bond in this reality. Otherwise, my photographic self wouldn't have the scar. The realization hammers at my chest.

"You're awake."

Draco's cold, low voice startles me. I didn't hear him come home, but he's now standing in the doorway watching me. He looks gaunt. Dark circles outline his eyes. He's wearing a black shirt and navy jeans. I was right. The cut sits just above his eye.

I don't know what to say. I can't find the words. Where do I even begin to explain? My magical core pangs at the sight of him, one beat, two beats, three. I want to run to his arms to restore my strength. I ache to connect with him, but his expression holds me back.

We stand, staring at each other for a long beat. Then, he takes a deep, heavy breath and walks towards me, saying, "You need to keep this wrapped. It will take a while to heal."

His message is kind, but his tone is harsh. Draco reapplies the gauze in silence as a charged tension spikes between us. His hands brush against my skin as he secures the bandage. It feels right to be so close.

I scour his face while he works. He's stone. I drop my head. Shame warms my cheeks. I know I messed things up, but what was I supposed to do?

"I had to," I whisper, staring at my feet.

His grasp on my upper arm tightens, and his eyes bore through me. He's furious.

"Under no circumstances, should you continue."

My jaw drops in response to his daring.

He stares for a moment with anger burning behind his eyes.

"I was forced to *watch*," he says. His voice is caustic.

I stand, head dropped in submission, waiting for him to continue. Draco's in the lead here. We both know it.

I knew when I decided to replace my younger self that if Bellatrix didn't kill me, Draco surely would.

"I can't even look at you," he sneers. He marches to the window with his back to me before he continues. "You have zero regard for your life." He rests his weight on his arms as he clutches the dresser in front of him. Then he pulls another slow breath and whips around. "Do you understand that you're everything to me?"

He tilts his head and raises his eyebrows. He wants me to answer him. I obey with a tiny nod.

With a finger pointed at me in anger, he continues, "When you put yourself in danger you're hurting what I hold the most dear." He walks back to me and lifts my chin with one finger to catch my eyes. His voice cracks like a whip. "How dare you, treat our love with such carelessness."

Draco holds my gaze for another moment to make his point, then scowls, turning back to the window.

"Can I talk now?" My frustration causes my question to sound brattier than I intend.

"I'd rather you didn't," Draco snaps, not turning around.

"That's how it was always supposed to happen! You were the one telling me that we needed to stop messing with time." I'm the biggest liar that ever existed. But this is the easiest excuse.

I can't very well say, look, I'm sorry, but I have no memory of the past, and I couldn't watch it happen. Honestly, I don't know if I messed with time or if it happened that way all along. Oh, by the way, in the future, we aren't happy. You're a monster.

"Your promises mean nothing. Your explanations are meaningless." Draco snarls. "I no longer trust anything you say."

"Draco—," I plead. He has no reason to trust me. Though, his words still sting. He's scary calm. I wish he would yell. At least that way, I could tell what he was feeling. He's controlled to a fault.

However, he wasn't calm at the Manor.

His irate expression when he yelled at Millie to take me home sends chills up my spine.

"Hermione, I had to Imperious you to soften the impact of the torture." There is a slight crack in his voice when he adds, "It was the only thing I could do to help."

Oh, right, that's what that was.

I cross my arms and stare at him. I'm appreciative of his attempt to block out the pain, but the memory of the last time he used that Unforgivable on me is still raw.

Not noticing my irritation, Draco keeps talking. It's as if he needs to get it all out. "I had to Imperious Petegrew too, to get him to let Potter out!" He paces as he fumes, throwing furtive glances at me over his shoulders as he goes. "I even had to hurry to change the wards when no one was looking. I caught Dobby trying to break-in. We changed the wards to keep him out after Potter freed him."

That must be why Millie's upset. Dobby is an old friend of hers.

"What happened to him?" I ask, butting into his rant, not thinking.

"He got himself killed, trying to save you three." Draco narrows his eyes at me. "Shouldn't you know that?"

Shit! "Uh— right. I forgot."

A skeptical frown pulls at the edge of Draco's mouth. "Were you even awake when my aunt threatened to hand you over to Greyback?" Draco asks.

"Yes? I think. I remember hearing something about that. But—" I'm about to say, *but you saved me, so it doesn't matter*. Though, Draco cuts me off.

"Do you know what scum like him are doing to witches — to *Mudbloods*?" he emphasizes the slur to make his point.

I shake my head at the ground again. It's clear from Draco's tone that he's going to tell me and that it's going to be awful.

"They're keeping them as sex slaves." He says with a growl, then lets his statement hang in the air.

I scowl. Yeah, I do know this already. I guess.

I try not to roll my fuming eyes at him. He doesn't know any better, but the irony is getting to me.

"They keep them captive and docile. They even brand them in case one goes missing."

Anger boils under my skin as he describes my future circumstances. I'm so triggered that I don't realize he's still talking until it's too late.

"—There's this spell. We're all taught it. If you tap the witch and cast the nonverbal incantation. Then the mark appears. It's so that we all know who to return the witch to if she manages to run away."

I'm not looking at him. My fists are balled at my sides as he outlines what *he* will do to me in the future. It causes me to see red. I'm too tired for this shit.

"All we have to do is tap them like this—"

He moves as he speaks, and I'm too upset to catch it. I notice just as his wand is about to touch my skin.

Wait!! *NO!!*

When Draco's wand touches my hand the black outline of his brand blooms on my skin. I race to cover it up before he sees, damning the gods for my distraction.

I slam my hand down over the Malfoy crest, then raise my anxious eyes to his, hoping that he didn't see what just happened.

However, the answer is clear. It's written on Draco's face.

He wrenches my hands away, revealing the sinister marking below. His eyes are blown wide in shock.

This is bad. This is really bad. The walls start to close in as I realize all my lies are about to come crashing down around me.

"Hermione! *WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT!!?*"

Chapter 19: Truth

Chapter Summary

"Could you find a way to let me down slowly?
A little sympathy, I hope you can show me
If you wanna go, then I'll be so lonely
If you're leaving, baby let me down slowly"
-Let Me Down Slowly, XOXOMyah

"It's nothing! —"

I try in vain to pull my hand from Draco's grasp, hurrying to come up with a good enough excuse. My heart is beating a mile a minute as I brush my hair behind my ears and attempt to offer a light-hearted diversion. However, the move causes me to flash the sinister brand at him again. When Draco's eyes narrow I realize my mistake, so I thrust my hand behind my back.

"You're going to laugh— it's not what it looks like. It's—"

Draco isn't buying it though. He's furious about what happened at Malfoy Manor. His need to control this untenable situation tingles over my fingertips. There's no more hiding. He can sense my panic through our bond. It causes his eyes to burn with dominance as he cuffs my upper arm and backs me against the wall.

"Draco! What are you doing?" I yelp.

It's too late. I've lied too many times. I've pushed him too far. He doesn't wait for me to explain—wouldn't believe me if he did.

Instead, he growls, "Legilimens!"

It's as if the appearance of the brand confirmed all of his deepest fears. A crushing sense of self-loathing has always plagued Draco. He doesn't trust the goodness within himself. He's always looking for reasons to punish himself for his actions and is never willing to show himself compassion. He refuses to see how Voldemort is to blame for his darker deeds. He even argues when I try to offer words of forgiveness.

Anytime that I've reasoned, "You only did that under duress. You wouldn't have done that if you had a choice!"

Draco has always deflected, "It doesn't matter, I still *did* it!"

With one hand pressing me into the wall and one holding his wand to my face, he sifts through the haze of memories, pin-pointing the worst of them all. I squirm and squint my eyes, trying to break his connection and keep him from seeing everything I've kept secret.

He's violating my privacy. I sense Draco's fear. He's afraid of what he will discover, but he can't ignore my lies and story-weaving any longer. He narrows in on a vile and damning memory as if he's drawn by a beacon.

My fiercely loyal, protective, and passionate husband anticipates finding something awful and my memories don't disappoint.

The scene flashes before my eyes as Draco witnesses us trudging through the heavy doors to a banquet hall in a gothic estate. He's wearing Death Eater robes and dragging me behind him on a leash.

Foul men rape women against the walls as ominous music thuds around the room. Others slosh Meade over the floor as they laugh with one another, their slaves cowering at their sides. In the horrific scene, I'm wearing a plain grey dress — the same as all the other women — and I'm viewing the party as if drugged to high heaven. My eyes are glazed over. My expression is blank.

The Draco in my memory yanks on the chain around my neck as he pulls me towards Voldemort, barking, "Let's go Mudblood! Get moving!"

Disgusted, Draco shifts to another memory. My head feels like someone stabbed me with a shard of ice. My breathing picks up as I fight to stay conscious. I don't want to pass out again.

In the next scene, he lands on, we're in Order headquarters. I'm running for the door but stopped by the pain of Draco fisting my hair and yanking me back against his broad frame. Then he growls, "Uh uh, I can't have you running off again," before throwing me onto a cot and immobilizing me. Then the sequence blurs forward, stopping to show Draco cracking the back of his hand against my face.

As my furious partner sorts through my mind, my eyes roll back into my head. I'm that dried-up rubber band again, waiting to snap. My breathing is fast and shallow as I taste the bitter sting of his probing.

Draco bypasses hundreds of happy memories of us together in the future. He misses the long conversations we had while I recovered and the time when I was feeling especially melancholy about my limited memory. The night that he brought me out to the gardens to chart constellations together in the warm spring air. I remember that we smelled the sweet lilacs while holding each other. His kindness soothed my soul.

Yes, my world came tumbling down when I found the message that I left myself in *Hogwarts a History*, but before that, we were happy and in love. Or at least, I thought we were.

"No, please!" I cry, hoping he'll stop. I can't take any more of the pain and the grief. Tears stream down my face as his interrogation forces me to relive my most traumatic moments. Not only that but I'm crushed by the fact that I know these scenes are causing Draco to writhe and ache. I tried so hard to hold everything together, keep it all secret for both of our sakes, but everything is coming to light.

When he pulls away, Draco's eyes are wide. He stares at me and runs his hand through his hair. I watch as his devastation hardens his heart right before my eyes. He sets his jaw and lifts one side of his mouth in disdain.

"Everything was a lie." He states, more to himself than me. "Our love was never real." He's carved from stone—a layer of titanium protecting what's left of his soul.

"No. Not everything!" I hiccup, reaching for him and trying to get him to understand. He shakes me off. I may have started out trying to manipulate a better future for myself, but for several months now, my feelings for him have been genuine and deep. Draco tunneled his way into my heart. His steady, quiet devotion to *me*, despite all my flaws, took my breath away.

"You're not my wife." His eyes skate over my shaking body as if accepting an awful truth. I didn't think it was possible for Draco to look more upset than he had at the Manor. When I disobeyed him and accepted Bellatrix's torture, Draco looked beside himself with anger and fear. Now, all I see is his disgust.

"You're my *property*."

My heart breaks. I want to reassure Draco that he got it all wrong, that we are in fact in love in the future, and that everything is as I told him.

"No, please, listen!"

But he's right. No amount of story crafting will change these facts. No matter how much I wanted to believe the lie, we aren't star-crossed lovers. We don't have a happy ending. I've tried my best to change what happens and then deny the future, hoping to stay in the past forever, but there is no hiding from this truth.

I throw my hand up to my forehead and rub my eyes to ease the pain in my skull. This is too much.

Draco approaches me again, wand raised, ready to search for more information in my mind. He already crossed a line in his anger. His reckless blind eye to his conscience tastes acidic in my mouth. I sense his reasoning in his mood. He already did something horrible, so he might as well make it worth it.

I'm exceptionally familiar with the drive to learn more. I don't blame him for wanting the whole story, but I can't let him in again. I feel his callousness itch along my arms and know I won't be able to withstand another round of probing.

I scrunch my eyes and hold up a hand to him, yelling, "Please, no! Stop, it hurts too much. Draco, it *hurts*. You're hurting me. I can't take it!"

The memories he witnessed gut him as much as they did for me when I first experienced them. I watch as he loses all hope that our love is real, and I remember that feeling in my bones. He considers me for a moment, and then something changes in his demeanor. Draco shifts from lost to determined. I see him decide something before standing taller and glaring at me. In an instant, he morphs from my affectionate husband to the man who's tormented my nightmares—the new scar above his brow caps off the look.

Draco stares at me for a long moment. He's dangerous, calculated, and guarded.

"Let's go," he demands.

A pit forms in my stomach as he turns and walks away. I don't want to think that he would do anything rash, like turn me into Voldemort or kick me out on the streets, but I also can't predict his behavior in this cascade of change. I follow him out the door and down the hall to his office, just a few steps behind.

The sconces are dim when we arrive, and the room is moody and dark. I hug my arms to my chest and shiver, awaiting whatever Draco has planned. Then I flinch as he gives another harsh order.

"Sit."

I let out a deep sigh and settle into the chair beside me. Maybe if I don't argue with him, I can find a way to calm him down. If he's less defensive, I pray that I might be able to talk my way out of this again. However, the chill up my back tells me it's a lost cause.

Seeing that I obeyed him, Draco rounds his desk, and turns away, pulling something out of a cupboard under his bookshelf. He takes his time, moving with intention, then stalks back to me and leans against his desk to stare me down.

Then he holds out a small glass phial. It's filled with a clear potion. I let it hang in mid-air because I know what's in there, and I'm not interested.

Looking at him through my lashes, I consider the irony that the last thing he held out to me in here was my wedding ring. At that thought I run my thumb over the metal, spinning the band around in nervous anticipation of what's to come.

When I don't take the Veritaserum from him, Draco lifts an arrogant, challenging eyebrow.

"Draco, I'm not going to take that," I whisper, dropping my eyes in shame. "Let's talk—"

He interrupts. "This isn't a request."

His tone cracks as if he hit me. This Draco has never talked to me like this before. Suddenly, I'm aware that I still don't have my wand back. Draco has several ways to force me to imbibe if he wants to. He's already Imperiused me twice, not to mention his size advantage.

"You're going to drink this truth serum and answer all of my questions, or I'm going to scour your memories for the information I want. You can deal with the pain. You've already proven that you don't mind torture."

My skin crawls from how he talks to me, cold and detached. I hate my bloody life — my horrible circumstances! All I've ever done is try to survive in an evil and twisted world. I woke up scared and alone and trusted the only person who showed me kindness, only to find out that he had fabricated our entire love affair. Then, when everything turned upside down and Draco thrust me back in time, I did my best to carve out a sheltered place for myself. I finally thought I had some peace and quiet. I thought I might find happiness somehow, but now I'm stuck in another awful situation — hating and loving this man simultaneously. I'm numb. I pulse with the ever-present reality that I am alone and unloved, tossed around by fate.

My options are slim. Draco is my only form of safety. Yet —.is he safe now? Or have my lies done irrevocable damage?

I need to do what he says. Draco has me cornered. He holds all the power in this dynamic. My hands shake as I slide the potion from his grasp and twist off the top. As I tilt my head to take a small sip, Draco places a finger under my chin, forcing me to continue drinking while holding my gaze. His look brooks no argument. "You're going to drink it all, Hermione."

When I've choked down the last drop, and the bottle is empty, Draco waits for a beat. He sets the glass on his desk while I blink back, angry tears. I feel a flood of magic lick my skin and know the potion worked. Draco felt it, too, through the bond. I see his steely determination.

"I don't defeat him. That was bullshit. Voldemort wins." A slight upward lilt at the end of his statement hints at a question. But Draco already knows the answer.

"That's correct," I confirm. I can't stop the words from spilling out of me. It's devastating.

"How does it end?" I can hear the bitterness in his voice.

"I don't know. There's a battle and I apparently offer Voldemort some important Intel."

"What?! Why would you do that? What do you mean you don't know?"

I taste the salt of my tears as I cry, "There's an accident. I — I don't remember."

"What don't you remember?"

I rub my sleeves under my eyes and moan, "—anything before I woke up in the Manor. I've tried to learn more, uncover the whole story, and recall myself, but I have no idea who I really am."

Draco shifts his weight, crossing his arms and fisting his wand, looking thrown. "You don't remember the war? Hogwarts? Potter and Weasley?"

"None of it," I sob. "All I know is *you*. I know what you've told me, and that we're bound to one another." This is cruel. Speaking my circumstances out loud makes me feel small. Since landing in 1997, I've felt more empowered and in control. *I* was the one that pulled the strings. I was the one who had the information. But, now I'm weak again as I admit that everything I ever was, all that I am, has been crafted by him.

"Are you here with me because I sent you back in time? Or are you running from me?" Draco is guarded as he asks. He doesn't want to hear my answer.

"Both." The statement is out before I have a chance to prepare. It takes my breath away. I drop my head and stare at my hands, willing my heartbeat to slow. As I examine my response, I recognize its complexity. Those last couple of days in 2004 were a blur. I was terrified when Draco found me, but I still held out hope that there was something that he wasn't telling me. I wanted to believe that there was still a chance for us.

I pull an angry breath and dart my eyes to his, glowering at him as I consider how effective his grooming of me was.

I don't have a chance to feel sour for long, though, because Draco shoots out another furious question.

"Why did you try so hard to convince me we were in love then!? Why would you want to be anywhere near me!?" Draco's question lets me peek behind the curtain of his careful facade. It betrays him, and I feel the sharp edge of his grief.

"I hoped that if I could manipulate you into loving me, that I could possibly change my future for the better."

As soon as the words are out, I slam my hands over my mouth. My eyebrows rise in shock, and I suck in a helpless gasp. I sound like a wounded animal.

Everything goes still.

I can feel the razor-sharp tension between us, and it hurts. My heart beats fast as I take in how this will make Draco feel. I can sense the moment all his feelings for me chip away. They've calcified and are now dust under our feet. With one simple sentence I've confirmed that he's unloved. His hardened heart accepted a long time ago that his parent's love was conditional. All they cared about was gaining power and prestige. It caused them to align themselves with an evil dictator. Draco now spends his entire existence doing what he can to earn their affection, including honing himself into one of Voldemort's top soldiers, even though he despises the Dark Arts. Their love is flawed. He's isolated himself from building any other meaningful relationships. And now, when he thought he finally found tenderness, I treated him like everyone else, as if he were dispensable — another means to an end.

The gravity of my actions and confession take my breath away. I'm desperate for him to know that I changed. I *do* love him. I cherish his strength. I adore the way he's resilient against all odds and still holds true to his kindness and light. He holds me as we read together each night, buffering one another from the chaos of war. He runs his fingertips along my arm, offering comfort and laughter. He sees *me*. He challenges me. I need him to know how much I care for him, so I open my mouth to explain further but he cuts me off.

Draco hangs his head, runs his tongue under his teeth, and huffs a dark laugh. "Of course, you did."

"No!" I moan. "You don't understand. That's not the whole story!"

"Good job, Hermione. You always were a clever witch." I hate how his deep voice cuts me to the core. "— Os in every subject. Well, you succeeded. I guess you still *can* recall your former self."

"Stop!" I scramble to the edge of my seat, running my hands along his chest, pleading with him to listen. "Ask me about how I changed! Ask me about my feelings now! I love —"

Draco slaps my hand away and fists my throat. He doesn't place any pressure on me. Instead, he intends to make his point clear. He flicks his wand and casts a nonverbal *Silencio*, removing my ability to speak further. He's destroyed and refuses to let me change the terrible vision of himself he has witnessed. He hates himself. And he hates me.

"You and I are damaged. We're a curse to each other, and that stops today." I know how much he's hurting from the destruction of our love story. He desperately wanted to believe I was his soulmate, sent to heal his broken wounds. I fought that narrative but ultimately fell head over heels for *this* man. I wanted to spend the rest of my life tucked away in this reality with him. But he won't let me tell him that. He doesn't want his heart to shatter any further with the possibility that something real may have formed between our fractured souls. "You are going to get out of my sight. Head to your room and stay there. I don't want to see, hear, or even sense your presence."

I shake my head as more salty tears fall down my cheeks. I'm begging him, with my eyes, to stop and listen. I mouth, *No, Stop! Please!* but Draco ignores me. He just told me that I mattered more to him than anything else in the world, and now he looks at me like I am nothing.

He pulls me from the chair and drags me down the hall, kicking open my bedroom door and tossing me inside. Then he turns and slams the door behind him on his way out.

The following morning, I lay on my bed, curled into a ball, trying to catch my breath. I jolted awake from a fitful sleep and now clutch my chest, rolling over and burying my face into my pillow in despair. I have to find a way to get through to Draco. If nothing else, I need him to know that somewhere in the mess of our story, I developed honest and devastating love for him.

Without a solid plan for how to get him to see reason, I decide to follow his orders and stay out of his way for now. I slide out of bed, hanging my head as I pull on a pair of jeans and one of Draco's jumpers. It stops me in my tracks. I take a moment to bask in his smell of cologne and soap in the knit, wool warmth.

After dressing, I drag myself to the door and place my ear to the wood. I don't hear any movement, so I inch the door open and peek down the hall. My ears are tuned to every tiny whisper. But, after a minute or two, I realize I'm alone. Even though I'm not hungry, I know it's been a while since I've had any food, so I make my way to the kitchen to grab an apple or a granola bar.

When I round the corner, my heart stops.

An intricate gold top sits on the center of the kitchen table.

Draco left me a time-turner.

He had it all along.

Chapter 20: Grasmoor

Chapter Summary

Please stop calling
You've been dishonest
I've been through enough
Two face promise
Scars and traumas
You put me through enough
Yeah, I've been through, through
Enough with you, you
- Enough, Charlie onnafriday

Chapter Notes

I have some good news, folks! I've written the next three chapters and WILL be releasing them weekly on Fridays for the next few weeks! Hopefully I'll be able to keep that up. We'll see. I have a pretty clear idea of the flow of the rest of the piece so that helps!

Happy reading...also, damn you Greyback!

A warm breeze brushes my face. It lifts my hair in odd angles, causing me to run my hands over my tangly locks to tuck them behind my ears. I take a deep breath, smelling the sweet wildflowers and wet mud from the river below. This landscape is as beautiful as it looks in my picture.

I huff a sardonic laugh, considering how picturesque this scene is. Yet, it's missing the happy married couple.

Mount Grasmoor.

I needed to see it for myself. I needed to rub the dry dirt between my fingers as I sat on the summit, envisioning a life I never had.

I drop my head to fiddle with the golden top in my lap. For the hundredth time I wonder where it came from. Was this the one I used to arrive in 1997? If so, when and where did Draco discover it? If not, why does Draco have so many unusual time-turners that can span years and allow the traveler to stay for an undetermined amount of time? I run my thumb

over the intricate markings on its side. Its brilliance contrasts with the frayed cloth layers covering my injured forearm. So much has changed.

When I found the time-turner lying on the table two days ago, I knew I had to leave. Draco's message was clear. He discovered what happens to me in the future, knows what I would return to, and doesn't care. My deception hurt him so much that he doesn't want anything to do with me. Even now, I dip into the bond and feel his anger boiling. Whether he's wrecked with self-hatred or furious over my lies, I can't tell. I close my eyes, shake my head, and exhale in a bitter frown. It's probably both.

The morning I found the time-turner, it took me a while to process what occurred. I sat at the kitchen table for a long time, reflecting on everything. Time and the empty penthouse gave me a chance to take in the fact that I followed Draco to Malfoy Manor, met my younger self, got tortured, woke up at home to a furious husband, then, to top it all off, I revealed my secrets— like an ass.

I rub at the back of my hand. Gods, I wish I had paid more attention.

Sitting in the kitchen, I felt helpless. There was nothing I could do about how things played out. I knew that fate wouldn't let me live in the past with Draco forever. However, it still stung. Before our blow-up, I wanted to reveal the truth to Draco, but I could never find the words. My throat always dried up when I thought about explaining everything to him because I worried he wouldn't understand.

Draco told me that we're damaged. He's right. We are. No matter how much I love him, there's a part of me that still hates him for what he did to me in 2004. The older Draco held me captive, wiped my mind, and violated me. Worst of all, he made me love him and believe I was loved. A dull ache throbs in the pit of my stomach, a constant reminder of loss. Regardless, now I find myself numb with the weight of sorrow over the fact that we're *not* together because what we created in this time period somehow pieced my fractured heart back together. Like Kitsugi, the Japanese art that finds beauty in brokenness by fusing pottery shards with gold, Draco and I found a way to carve out light in the darkness.

While lost in thought that morning, I realized that in the craziness of all that went down at Malfoy Manor, I finally spoke with my younger self! And I learned something.

Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and I are hunting something called Horcruxes. There are seven of them, and Harry himself might be one. Also, there's something called the Deathly Hallows.

With that realization in mind, I downed a cup of tea, packed bread, cheese, and other staples into an empty bag from my bedroom closet, and then prepared to set off on my own. My body ached from missing Draco's touch for many days, but it didn't matter. I was no longer wanted. I needed to go. I planned to try to find some Heat Suppressant on the way.

To give myself a chance of safety, I ransacked Draco's office in search of my wand. I upturned papers and books while keeping an ear out for the sounds of anyone approaching. Just as I was about to give up, I found it hidden in a compartment in the ornate wood of his desk. The fact that Draco left me the time-turner and not my wand either meant that he wasn't

fully committed to sending me back to hell or was too blinded by anger to remember that I'd need both.

I kick the dirt under my feet at that thought while staring at the horizon over the mountain. It doesn't matter. Either way, I'm unwanted.

Before I left our penthouse, I needed to do a few things. I stopped in my bedroom to grab my only possessions — the black stone portkey that Firenze gave me, Remus' empty satchel that I took from Order Headquarters, and our wedding photo. Then, I sent one of Draco's owls on a mission.

The large birds typically perched on the balcony awaiting assignments, so I slid open the thick, glass door and walked out into the noise of car horns, sirens, and the whooshing wind. Taking a deep breath, I chose a speckled owl and sent her to Knockturn Alley.

She returned an hour later with two books and a note.

Mrs. Malfoy,

It is a pleasure to meet you by way of correspondence. We secured two books that hold the information you seek. We had the enclosed dark text on hand, but Beetle the Bard required us to send one of our clerks into Diagon Alley.

As you know, the rarity of the dark text and the personal risk we incur when shipping it to you come at a premium. We also needed to charge extra for the trip to Flourish and Blotts.

We will deduct our fees from your vault at Gringotts by way of a courier so that there isn't a tie from our business dealings to yours.

Ever your servants.

Borgin

After the books arrived, I transfigured my appearance, walked to the street, and summoned the Knight Bus. Several other witches and wizards sat in the various recliners and overstuffed chairs, but everyone kept their eyes on the floor or stared out the window. No one talked. Electricity coursed through my body during the entire ride. At one point, I had to press my palm onto my jittery leg to stop it from bouncing. I was on high alert, knowing that travelling was dangerous.

I tried my best to distract myself on the long bus ride but found my mind wandering to bittersweet moments between Draco and myself. For instance, one moment from a few days after Christmas nagged me for attention.

It was early in the morning when I woke to Draco's lips on my neck. He laid on his side, molded to me, and dipped his head, sending gooseflesh up my arms as he sucked on a sensitive spot at the junction of my neck and shoulder. I hummed my approval and rolled my hips against him.

"It's early, Draco. You had me up all night. Don't you ever sleep?"

"For some reason, I find it difficult with you pressed against me." His voice was pure silk.

I leaned my back into his chest and bent my neck to capture his sinful lips, then rolled my hips again a little slower. Draco growled in response.

"I imagine it's hard to make it through the day on so little rest," I said while twisting to face him and dragging my leg over his.

Draco stilled. He stared into my eyes and whispered, causing our bond to pull and coil with delicious tension. "Just the opposite actually." He shifted my weight, pulling me to straddle his wide hips, then notched his length against my awakening sex. "It's impossible to make it through my days without you. With everything I'm forced to endure, I'd happily never sleep again if that meant that you could help me forget for a while."

My breath hitched as he brushed his hardness against my clit. I itched to remove the clothes that kept him from sinking into me again.

"Oh, I see," I teased while throwing my head back and enjoying the feeling of his evocative touch. "You only want me for my body."

Draco grasped my chin and drew my eyes to his once more. "No, Hermione, not only that."

The way he looked at me felt raw as if all pretenses were stripped away. I dropped my eyes and nodded. His words meant everything to me.

"I love you," he said, then he slid my nightgown over my head and pulled my body down for a searing kiss.

Memories like that one plagued my thoughts while the rusty bus swayed this way and that over winding roads. There were countless similar moments from the past few months — perfect, breath-taking. I found it hard not to torment myself with them while running from him again. The irony was not lost on me as I repeatedly wiped tears from my eyes with the back of my sleeve.

The closest stop near Grasmoor was in the village of Frizington, where several wizarding families reside. What felt like hours later, the haggard driver called out the stop, and I ducked my head while hurrying down the metal steps. Even with my disguise, I worried about drawing too much attention. From there, I started walking. I hiked the remaining twelve miles to the base of the rock, then made sure the coast was clear before Apparating to the top.

Altogether, the journey took me until last night. I had to spend one night on the road, but I was able to duck into a wooded area and find a decent spot to lie down. The twigs and leaves made a poor bed, but I was too tired to care about sleeping on the rocky ground. It was late, and I knew I would find the rest of the trek easier in the light. With the stress of everything and no Millie to pop in with breakfast, I slept well past noon. After I rose, I took my time eating, then plotted out the rest of my path using a hiker's guide I swiped from a small shop in

town. As I walked, I listened to the trees and rustling noises of animals in the woods, always on alert. Finally, I made it to the top of the mountain about an hour after dusk.

When the sun woke me this morning, I pulled some bread and cheese out of my bag and ate while listening to the wind.

A bullfinch trills a sad song that echoes through the valley and draws my attention.

I stand and stretch my back, hearing it crack. Then I begin the arduous task of pacing around the top of the mountain, tilting my head this way and that, looking for the exact spot. It takes me about twenty minutes, but eventually I identify where Draco and I are standing in my photo. I pull it out of my pocket, confirming that the angle is correct across the horizon. Holding the image up, I see that the cliffs are perfectly aligned.

Draco and I smile up at me from the picture like they know something I don't. They're snuggled together with dewy eyes for each other, and it makes my stomach hurt, so I slam the crumpled paper back into my pocket.

Listless, I pick up my bag and Apparate to the mountain's base to dip my fingers in the calm river. I'll return to the summit, but I want to appreciate the mountain's majesty from below. I walk near the water for a bit, then see a flat ledge on the rock, fifty feet up. I have nothing better to do, so I make the tricky climb, then drop my bag and sit on the rock's edge. I breathe deeply as I wipe the perspiration from my brows. The landing is a decent size. I imagine rock climbers camp here occasionally.

I rub the back of my neck, wondering if Draco found what I left him.

Before I caught the Knight Bus, I did one final thing. I walked to the living room in our penthouse, then syphoned out all of my memories, leaving them in the Pensive. I tried to get everything essential. I wanted Draco to see the entire story from my perspective — the love that burned within me, the way it crashed to the ground, my determination to discover more about myself, and my journey through time. I paid close attention to every tiny moment between us from when I landed in 1997. I wanted him to see the progression I experienced, from plotting against him to being fiercely committed to staying in the past forever because of my love for him. I reasoned that maybe it would alleviate some of his pain. But maybe not. Who knows. Regardless, it was the only way I could try to get him to understand my motivation and true feelings. He clearly wasn't interested in entertaining my explanations the night I awoke with my new scar.

I pull a deep sigh.

Then I push up from the ground and walk back to my bag. Next, I dig out the two books Borgin sent me, feeling within the front pocket for my wand to reassure myself that it's still there.

The time-turner catches my attention again. I lift it out of the bag and twist the gold hemispheres to align the month and day, April 18th. Then, without thinking, as if daring myself or simply seeing what would happen, I twist the year from 1998 to 2005. Nothing happens, but I envision how the golden top would glow and spin if I placed my wand tip to it. The thought frightens me. A shiver runs over my shoulders, and I scowl while hurrying to set the year back to 1998. Holding the time-turner feels like immense power, but I haven't decided what to do next. I don't know if I should use the time-turner or not. I don't want to return to the mess I left, but my body is uncomfortable with need. Grief barely masks my thick desire. I'll need to sate the bond soon, and I have no hope that the Draco from this time will be any help. At least I can depend on the Draco in the future to fuck me. That thought makes me scratch my skin and rub at the back of my neck, frowning. The books and research will hopefully distract me for a little while.

I find my seat near the edge of the rock again and begin reading. First, I flip through the children's book because it is by far the friendlier looking of the two. I crack open the bindings and find a page marked with a short story entitled *The Three Brothers*. Borgin also left a note.

The magical objects in this well-known fable are what some conspiracy theorists call the "Deathly Hallows." No one has ever found evidence to support those claims.

The story is simple, and I still have no idea what significance it plays when I finish it. I have more luck with the second book, though. I'm curious about the sinister text but weary. It feels like it's dripping with dark magic, and the pictures outline as much. My stomach rolls as I search for the description of Horcruxes, but I tamp down my unease, lean in, and brush my hair behind my ears to pay close attention.

Scrutinizing this evil book feels like the exact kind of thing that Draco wouldn't want me to do. He's always hell-bent on keeping me in the dark regarding the inner workings of the war. However, he wants nothing to do with me any longer, so he doesn't get a say in what I read!

It doesn't take long before I put everything together.

I run my fingers under the small font as I read. Then, I slam the book shut and suck in a quick breath. My younger self gave me all the information needed to take Voldemort down once and for all. The realization stops me in my tracks.

Suddenly, my shoulders feel heavy with exhaustion. I have all the knowledge but none of the capability needed to change the future for the better. It's necessary to find and destroy seven Horcruxes, including *Harry Potter himself*? They could be anything! Only after destroying them will Voldemort be vulnerable to attacks.

Ending the war is an impossible task that includes murdering one of my former best friends. No wonder the evil bastard wins.

I clutch the edges of the sinister book, feeling my rage growing. Everything horrible in my life is because of this sick dictator. Without him and the war, I would have my memories, independence, and safety. I might have graduated from Hogwarts and connected with Draco some night after work. We may have had a chance at brushing off our former rivalries and not

been condemned to this horrible existence. We could have been whole, unbroken, healthy young adults who enjoyed things like strolling through London together or travelling.

A heartbreaking vision of us holding hands at an exquisite music hall overtakes me. I can almost hear the music played by the skilled performers. I feel Draco and I itching to play together as we observe the candlelight concert. We are safe, happy, and desperately in love.

The thought causes me to scrunch my eyes. I fist my hair. My ears are hot with rage. We could have had a real love story—the beautifully mundane kind, where no one lies, hurts, or torments one another. I'm so tense with disappointment that I want to scream. Everything that has happened over the past few weeks, months, and years comes flooding back to me, and I experience all of the gut-wrenching anguish. I feel like I am going to burst with indignation. I'm itchy and irritated. I need an outlet.

When I remember that I'm alone in the wilderness, I throw caution to the wind and yell at the top of my lungs.

"FUCK YOU, VOLDEMORT!!"

Like the bird's song, my voice echoes and reverberates around the vast landscape. I even startle several starlings out of a bush nearby. It feels good to let off steam. I hollered so loudly that I shook my hair into my face, but it works, I feel a bit better. After a beat, I laugh at myself and brush my curls behind my ears again.

Just then, a terrifying voice, snarls behind me.

"Hello Lovely. Well, aren't I lucky."

Chapter 21: Unforgivable

Chapter Summary

"Just close your eyes, the sun is going down

You'll be alright, no one can hurt you now

Come morning light, you and I'll be safe and sound"

-Safe and Sound, Taylor Swift

I jump out of my skin in fear at the sound of the deep growl behind me. I whip around to find the foul-looking man I saw at Malfoy Manor — the one that Bellatrix threatened to give me to after she tortured me. He smiles as I stumble to my knees, then push up from the rocky ground, reaching for my wand in my back pocket. But it's still in my bag, about twenty feet away.

When did he get here? How did he know where I was!?

"Stay away from me!" I hiss while craning my head from side to side to ensure there aren't more with him.

The man, who I think Draco referred to as Grey *something*, sniffs the air around us and pulls a slow, indulgent grin. "Oooh, I *am* lucky. You're ripe, aren't you, kitten."

At his revolting words, my stomach churns. I attempt to fake him out by leaning to my left just before I dash to my right. Luckily, he trips while grasping at me. So I run as fast as I can to my backpack not bothering to fish my wand out of the pocket, hoping that I can still Apparate away without holding the wood in my hand. I'm not thinking straight as I try whatever I can to escape. Hugging the bag to my chest, I twist on the spot, focusing on the downtown area of the little village nearby. I scrunch my eyes, thinking that If I land near other witches and wizards, this beast might be too afraid to risk taking me in public.

Suddenly, everything hurts. In my frantic attempt to get away, I splinch myself, ripping a long, swollen red gash down my side. I buckle over in pain, pulling at my shirt to reveal the damage. However, I keep my eyes on the disgusting man while I move in case he reaches for me. The scruffy asshole steps forward a few paces, stalking me. It makes my ears start to ring as my mind races. I shake with fear realizing that with the cliff to my back, I'm fucked! Pain shoots up my side as I consider my options. I'm terrified. I shouldn't Apparate again with this injury.

As I fight to catch my breath, he continues advancing on me, looking predatory. I try again to wield magic without pulling my wand from the bag because there isn't enough time. I cast a repelling charm and then attempt a Salvio Hexia to ward off his potential spells or curses.

"Watch it, girlie. There's no point in fighting."

He's leering at me in a way that causes my skin to crawl. I focus harder, knowing I only have a few more seconds to escape.

"You'll be a good little pet. I might even keep you around for a while before I kill you," he sneers.

Frantic, I step back again, nearly falling over the edge. My heart is pounding, and I'm starting to get desperate. I consider for a brief moment whether or not it would be better to jump, but no matter how hard life is, I don't want to die.

The man lunges for me. His dirty jacket flaps in the wind, and I get a whiff of his rank scent.

"Protego!" I cry, searching for my wand in my pack.

Crack!

"Avada Kadavra!!"

I clench my eyes closed while bracing myself for the man's grasp. But, instead, he falls at my feet — eyes wide and blank.

"What?!" I whimper.

Tears obscure my vision as I slowly register what happened. In shock, I wipe them from my face and search my surroundings.

Draco is a few feet away, still in his battle stance. He's holding his wand out, looking furious.

My mind reels as I try to process the fact that I was sitting alone in the vast wilderness a few seconds ago, and now there's a wizard at my feet. Then, my side burns so I clutch at my hip in pain. There's a deep throbbing pulse, but I don't see any bleeding. I think I'll be able to heal myself if I can get to some Dittany.

I hear rocks crunch as Draco shifts. He came? He saved me. He came for me when I needed help despite everything we've been through. My heart hammers in my chest. I'm unable to speak as relief washes through me.

Draco pulls a deep breath while watching me, then demands, "Are you okay?"

Without thinking, I run to him. My chest aches with the need to be held and comforted. I can't stand it any longer. I see him let out a sigh of relief and drop his shoulders a fraction just as I hear more sounds of Apparition.

Two other wizards appear.

"Sir."

They each offer the terse greeting while nodding to Draco. They look determined and sinister as they take in their surroundings on the rock ledge. My head spins. I shifted from terrified to relieved to now shocked in a matter of seconds. The Death Eaters pose a new threat. They see me running to Draco and note the man on the ground. Their bodies tense as they witness their boss standing in front of a fallen soldier, with his wand outstretched, about to embrace an Undesirable. I skid to a halt as the stone slips under my feet. There is a shift in the wind. Tension builds between us as the men quickly realize something is amiss.

Time slows to a stop as the air between us ignites like a powder keg, and I watch Draco's eyes blow wide. He spins, directing his wand towards the men. Suddenly, magic shoots around the ledge.

"Hermione, *GET DOWN!!*"

Draco is fighting two-on-one. His gaze is cold, and his strength is evident in how he controls his magic. The wind whips my face as I see colorful streaks of hexes and hear corresponding sharp cracks.

Within the blink of an eye, a spell grazes Draco's shoulder, only just missing him. It wakes me from my stupor, causing me to shoot into action. Terrified, I fall to the ground, scrambling for my bag, then struggle to retrieve my wand. I can't risk attempting wandless magic again.

Draco turns to focus on the bigger of the two men. I have a split second to comprehend that he is about to receive a curse to the back. The shorter wizard casts a spell, shooting a blast of light and heat into the air. As I watch, my stomach drops in horror. Panic grips my throat.

Everything flashes before my eyes. I picture Draco's smile — light-hearted and genuine. I remember the feel of his hand on the back of my neck as he took my breath away with a kiss. I see all the tender moments between us in every time period. None of the trauma sneaks in as my soul fractures with despair at the idea of losing him.

"*NO!*" I wail.

As soon as my fingers find the thin wood, I roll to my back, clutch my wand in both hands, point at the man behind Draco, and scream.

"AVADA KADAVRA!!"

"Avada Kadavra!"

The two men crumple as they succumb to our curses.

I pant while standing up, holding my wand lightly in my hand. I glare at the men, Draco, then back to their prone figures before letting out a stuttered gasp. I killed someone. I killed him. He's *dead*.

Draco holsters his wand and then holds his hands out before him as if approaching a spooked Thestral. I must look crazed. His cautious expression tells me that murdering two Death Eaters didn't phase *him*. His only concern is whether I'm alright. When I see him, my breath catches. Thank the gods, he's alive! My ears continue to ring as I sprint forward, slamming into his arms. I scan his appearance, touching and feeling, looking for any evidence of damage.

"Gods! Are you hurt?" I cry, hiccuping. My body shakes from the intense fear I just experienced. "Please, please say you're not hurt. I can't handle it." I continue searching his clothes for singe marks as I talk. I'm frantic to confirm that he's unharmed. I run my hands over his robes, which are protected with thick dragon hide. There isn't a scratch on him — not on his robes, hands, or face. He's okay.

Draco looks guarded as I fuss over him. At first, he narrows his eyes, considering me. It pains me to see how suspicious of me he is as if I might fabricate my concern for his safety. I have so much work to do to get him to understand how much I care for him... If he'll let me.

Then, something changes in his expression. He lets out a deep sigh of relief, threads his fingers into my curls, and slams our lips together.

He tastes like mint, smells like soap, and feels like heaven. My core flip flops with excitement over being together once again. It's as if every fiber of my being ignites. I feel his touch everywhere, like being engulfed in intensity. I've tried so hard over the past few days to tamp down my need for him, but suddenly, my core cries out like it's gasping for air. Draco *is* my oxygen. He is the only thing that my magical center needs to survive. Our bond sings, sparkling and electrified as we bathe in each other's presence. The danger passed, and now a flood of endorphins overwhelm me. I feel giddy with relief. I match his intensity, sucking on his bottom lip and running my tongue against his.

"You could've let me die," he growls into my lips before continuing to devour me.

I moan, nip at his lower lip, then dip my tongue to taste him again. It takes me a second because I'm lost in the thrill of his touch, but eventually, I comprehend what he just said. Shocked, I push back, holding him at arm's length as he crushes me to his chest.

"What!?"

He pauses to brush his fingers over my temple. His expression is soft. I see the depth of his emotion in his eyes. He looks stunned and moved.

"It would have changed your future for the better. It would have dissolved our magical connection and erased—" he clears his throat and avoids my eye contact as he confesses, "—erased everything I do to you in the future." His voice is pained. "You could've let him kill me."

My arms lock as I glare at him, incredulous. His words cause my heart to shatter into a thousand pieces. Draco would have understood if I let him die. His self-hatred is that strong. No one ever protects him, loves him enough, comforts him. He is used to feeling unworthy, and my memories reinforced that narrative. It's agonizing to witness. This powerful man isn't afraid of anything. He's rising in ranks in history's most evil magical regime; wizards fear him, yet he can be so vulnerable.

"No I couldn't have! How could you think that?" I stand on my tiptoes, running my hands over his thick arms, then tenderly holding his jaw. "*You* could've done the same — let that man abuse me, kill me. It would've made your life a lot easier," I reason, hoping he will see the ridiculousness of this train of thought.

Draco gazes into my eyes. His silver irises are shimmering pools of weighty intention. They promise to guard all the answers I seek within their depths. I feel the breeze and am comforted by his strong arms. My chest warms as he speaks more sincerely than I've ever heard.

"I never could've done that."

Then he leans forward to kiss the top of my head before bringing me back to his chest.

I try to make sense of it all and respond with light-hearted self-deprecation. "Right, because it wouldn't work. I'd still be alive in this time period, somewhere."

"No, you daft witch! I don't give a fuck about your younger self. It's not because of her." He presses me into his hard body, holding on as if I might fly away. His voice is dead serious. There's no hint of a joke when he continues. He runs his hand over my back and into my hair again. Then he whispers, "You dying would end me."

I close my eyes for a moment to savor his words. He's here with me. He's no longer furious. We might have a chance—my body tenses. I'm suddenly at a loss for how to proceed. I long for a way to repair our relationship and return to the beautiful story we were building for ourselves, but I don't know where to start. We've been through so much. I'm not even sure that it's possible.

A long stretch of silence passes as I consider what his words mean. I hold my breath, anxious as I ask, "Did you watch my memories?" My voice sounds small. I shouldn't allow myself to hope that he may have changed his mind about me or may be open to discussing things to move forward together. He was so hurt and angry.

He places his chin on my head and takes a deep breath. I feel his chest rise and fall. I'm too afraid to move because I don't want to interrupt this moment. If this is our last time together, I want to make it last.

"I'd just finished viewing them when I felt you in danger."

I stare at the rugged landscape, listening to every minute change in the tone of his voice.

He continues, "— I had just lifted from the Pensive and was sitting on our couch with my head hung, rubbing the back of my neck when suddenly I felt a wicked clang of danger in my chest. I knew I needed to get to you and fast."

Sometimes, our bond comes in handy, I guess. I often think of it as somewhat of a nuisance, locking me together with this man regardless of how in love or furious we are with one another or making me drip with need. But it also calls us to one another if we are in danger.

Something itches at the edge of my mind. I narrow my eyes and reflect on the times I've been away from Draco. He was able to find me in Diagon Alley. He knew where I was today. He even found me in the Forbidden Forest before I escaped underground to Order Headquarters. I shiver thinking about how mad he was when the wards finally faltered.

He tilts my head to meet my gaze, "Hermione, those memories —you've been through so much." His voice wavers, "I'm so sorry—"

I place my fingers on his lips to stop him.

"Don't you dare. None of that was *your* fault." I lower my hand and stumble over my words, " *I'm* sorry for lying to you."

His grasp on me feels tight as I wait for him to respond. I hear the rushing river trickle over rocks in its path, then watch a large cloud move in front of the sun for a brief stint, throwing shadows across the valley.

Eventually, Draco lets out a frustrated sigh through his nose. "I understand now."

The wind swirls around us as we stand in contented silence for a moment. The view looks even better now. I hear the birds again, and their songs don't sound as sad this time.

Draco rubs my arms, then turns me to inspect my injury, scowling at the deep gash at my side. I lean into his embrace, thanking the gods that he's more willing to talk now. He's had enough time to calm down. Draco has always been quick to punish himself with solitude and anger. When I first arrived, he often pushed me away when we got too close, only to show up later, fevered for more. I wring my hands hoping that this more severe incident might still follow the same pattern. There's a lot to go over, but his words give me hope.

"Stay here," he demands, dropping his arms and preparing to Apparate away.

His order doesn't make sense. Why would he leave me here with all of this chaos? I scrunch my eyes in confusion and protest, but Draco continues.

"I'll be right back. I promise."

I frown but nod. I'd do anything for him since he is so open to discussing things. Draco scrutinizes my features one last time. I have a feeling that he's checking to ensure I don't look like I'm going to run away again or do anything stupid. I roll my shoulders, stand taller, and offer a wan smile, trying to convey my trustworthiness. He waits one more second, then marches over to the three wizards and vanishes them before turning and disappearing.

I've been alone on the rocky ledge for fifteen minutes — enough time to sort through my complex emotions. I'm thrilled Draco showed up, but I'm also reeling from the fact that I just cast an Unforgivable. I start to shake again and scratch at my skin. I don't want to be by myself right now.

When Draco returns, he steps into action. He's not willing to stand on the rock ledge holding each other for hours. He's in triage mode, trying to clean up evidence and direct our next moves.

"We need to get going." He kisses me quickly and pats my shoulder as if to set me in motion. Draco retrieves my bag and explains, "I moved them to a village 80 kilometers from here. If

anyone finds them, they'll assume the fight was between the three of them."

Still in his Death Eater robes, my backpack looks odd draped over his shoulder. It reminds me of how I dug out my wand from its pocket earlier and then ended a man's life.

Tears begin to fall down my cheeks again. The guilt eats away at me. "Draco, I killed—" my voice breaks as I feel crippling shame.

He walks over to grab my hand, then rubs his thumb over my knuckles, soothing, "I know, love."

The care in his voice warms my fractured spirit. Draco kisses me again, slow and tender this time, before reassuring me. "It was self-defense. You did well." He wipes the tears from my eyes and then adds, "You were so brave," before kissing my forehead. "But I know it's a heavy weight to carry."

His words ease my soul. I sniffle once or twice more, then ask, "How did they find me?" I suddenly need to convince Draco that I wasn't trying to endanger myself again. He must think that I have a pathological problem, putting my life at risk so frequently. I can see his eyes burning; the incident at the Manor is still looming between us. "I swear, I was careful! I thought I was safe —"

I feel his muscles tense as his body goes rigid. But, then Draco nods. His mouth pulls to one side, scowling as he accepts my explanation, even though it's apparent that he was still worried. Then he clears his throat, saying, "Things are changing quickly. The Dark Lord instituted a Taboo on his name, meaning anyone who speaks it will be instantly trackable."

A chill runs up my spine as he talks. *That's* why! I'm an idiot. In hindsight, there was no reason to speak Voldemort's name out loud. My shoulders shiver as I begin to worry about what else I might not know that could alert the Death Eaters to my location.

"You spoke his name?" Draco confirms. His head tilts as he lifts my chin.

I nod. "It's a long story."

Accepting that explanation, for now, Draco continues. "He came back from a recent trip with a new wand, and is now acting almost giddy with power. He had already recently sanctioned the slavery and branding of Muggleborn witches—."

Draco stops talking as the mention of branding witches causes an awkward moment to settle between us. I drop my gaze and stare at his hands. But even that doesn't work because I can picture how those hands held a wand to my face, ready to Obliviate me again as he dragged me out of Order Headquarters.

"Hermione?" His voice is pained.

"I'm okay," I mumble. "You can continue."

"I'm —," His deep timber begins as I know he is about to apologize again.

"Please, Draco, just keep going," I beg, trying not to sound too irritable.

Draco clears his throat. "Anyways, now he also Tabooed his name, and even started petrifying those who oppose him."

"Petrifying!?"

"Yes. He had Snape secure some basilisk blood and create a new potion. He's been using to turn people into stone. He's a sick fuck. He says that petrifying them is a worse sentence than death because they will live on, frozen, and unable to move. He hopes they'll go crazy with anguish. It's his newest form of torture."

That's horrific.

"Let's go," he barks again, not wanting to stay on the rock ledge too long.

"Where?" I feel my panic renew. "Won't they be able to track me now?"

"No, the Taboo only provides the location of witches or wizards that used his name. It doesn't follow them." He holds his hand out to me in a silent directive. "My family owns a small vacation home nearby. We'll go there. I can't take you back to our penthouse."

I wait, not taking his hand yet. "Why?"

"The Dark Lord came by yesterday to interrogate me further. He's punishing my family because we let you and Potter get away."

Draco raises his eyebrows and rubs at his forehead. The incident at Malfoy Manor is still a touchy subject between us, but I can tell he is trying to keep his anger out of his voice.

"My parents and aunt are confined to the Manor, but the Dark Lord wants me to continue running raids for him." Draco frowns as he finishes. "He's keeping me on a very short leash, though. Now that he's been to our home, it's not safe for you any longer."

I try to respond, but the words don't form. I pick at my fingernails, sorting through everything his explanation causes me to feel. My mind is full of buzzing, murky thoughts. I hate that the incident at Malfoy Manor made Draco's life even harder. It must have been excruciating for him over the past few days, with Voldemort punishing them *and* considering our fallout.

Instead of responding, I roll my lips and cast my gaze downward.

Draco holds his arm out to me again, looking stern. I grab ahold, and then, in an instant, we vanish, arriving at a small stone villa.

The cozy, dark home smells very old, like the stone walls have kept generations of Malfoys dry and comfortable no matter what weather rages outside. Draco marches through the cottage, setting the wards and removing white sheets on the furniture to keep the dust at bay during long stretches of disuse.

As he works, I explore our new accommodations. The tension between us is thick. We're both aching to touch one another and sate our bond, but everything has changed, and we still need to discuss a lot. We don't know how to be together anymore. My shoulders feel heavy as I reflect on everything we've been through while winding through the hallways, taking it all in.

Eventually, I reach the main suite and push open the door. The view out of the window shows rolling hills. Have I been here before? The thought unnerves me.

There's a moment of silence as thoughts swirl in my mind. Then, I startle as a large, careful hand lifts the side of my shirt.

"Here," Draco hums behind me while rubbing drops of a sweet-smelling potion into my abused skin. "Let me help."

Thank Godric; his attention feels amazing. My eyes roll back in appreciation as Dittany does its job knitting my injuries together. The magic kisses my skin, leaving Draco's large hand slowly rubbing up and down my side.

"I flooded home to bring back food and supplies. The fridge is stocked now. I imagine you're hungry."

Draco's deep voice warms my neck. I can feel how close he is, and it's as though our magical cores are stretching out to one another, attempting to pull us together.

Turning to face him, I notice that he removed his battle robes. Desire blooms within me as I take in his fitted trousers, light blue button-up shirt, and casually rolled sleeves. This is *my* Draco. He pauses, looking unsure of how to proceed, which feels odd. More often than not, Draco is dripping with a delicious arrogance that is uniquely him. I freeze, awaiting his clue as to how everything will play out.

He runs his eyes up and down my figure, considering me, then presses his tongue under the bottom of his teeth and cocks his jaw to one side. Eventually, he says, "We should talk."

"Okay," I agree in a breathy voice.

Draco leads me to the living room, grabbing an apple from the kitchen. He hands it to me and keeps going. When we reach the comfortable sitting area near the large bay window, he stops and waits for me to choose where to sit. His hands are in his pockets, and he looks stony and severe. Tension twangs between us again, and I recognize this is a weighty decision. Each option carries a myriad of implications about what I'm feeling and where our relationship stands. Taking a deep breath, I shake off my hesitation and decide to sit on the couch, hoping my choice indicates an invitation. He chooses the other end of the sofa but turns to face me.

"Hi," he says after a long stretch of painful silence. "—I'm Draco Malfoy."

At first, I'm confused, but then I catch Draco's expression, cautious but open, and I decide to play along. He's right. This is an introduction of sorts. We are both staring at each other for the first time. Not as Draco, my mysterious husband turned owner, or Hermione, his time travelling future love, but simply two people meeting one another again for the first time without secrets or ulterior motives clouding our judgment.

"Hi," I whisper. "I'm Hermione M-malfoy."

It's the truth. I'm not Hermione Granger. I don't know her. I'm the woman attached to this man, for better or worse, now and in the future.

Draco's eyes soften at my admission. He shifts his weight and runs his hands over the tops of his dark pants.

"I met a frustratingly independent woman who fed me a bunch of lies," Draco continues, and his assertion causes my stomach to knot up, but then he adds, "But she also made me fall in love with her."

My heart warms. I hurry to respond.

"I met a man who I wanted to hate." Draco's jaw sets as he listens. "But, I couldn't."

My voice cracks and tears fill my eyes again. I feel as though I've spent the entire day crying.

"He was too kind — too compassionate and strong." I drop my gaze to my hands and wring them together in my lap. "He saw me, even though I... I... didn't deserve it. I deceived him."

I scrunch my eyes and wipe the tears from my cheeks.

"I fell in love with him. I —"

"Come here," he demands, interrupting me.

I shake my head, too ashamed to move. I can't allow myself to accept this comfort.

When I don't budge, Draco grabs my wrist, yanking me into his arms and onto his lap. I cry in earnest as he brushes my hair out of my face.

"Shh."

I lose my breath. I'm panicking, trying to get out my deep and honest feelings.

"Draco, I'm so sorry."

"Stop, Hermione," He soothes. "Stop. You're right. We're both sorry."

The way he holds me causes my frozen heart to melt. His heavy arms drape around me as he rubs small circles on my back. It drives me insane with the need to touch him, but more than that, I feel safe for the first time in a very long time.

I try to lighten the mood by sniffing and teasing, "You said it best. We're damaged."

"I was hurt," he admits while cupping my chin and demanding my attention. "But, I see now that we aren't broken beyond repair."

I feel light-headed with relief. I'm overwhelmed with the idea that all pretenses might be washed away, and we might find a way to craft our love story after all. He pulls me toward him to take another kiss from me. This time, it tastes sweeter than ever. "You were right about one thing all along."

I tilt my head, pulling back to ask, "About what?"

"We need to fix the future."

I run my fingers over the small scar above his temple, thanking the gods that our priorities finally align. It feels like he removed a fifty-pound weight from my shoulders. We can finally trust one another. I kiss him, slow and indulgent, pulling his bottom lip into my mouth and trying to convey my devotion to him.

Draco bends his head to suck on my neck. Then, I feel a shock of intense desire as he growls, "Hermione, I need you."

Chapter 22: Promises

Chapter Summary

I was all alone with the love of my life
She's got glitter for skin
My radiant beam in the night
I don't need no light to see you
Shine
It's your golden hour (oh)
You slow down time
In your golden hour (oh)
-Golden Hour, Jvke

Three little words are all that's needed to burn away the remaining barrier between us. We're fused now, burnished by the adversity of our love story — a tragedy of smoldering coals. It's not a perfect, sweet tale, but it's ours. We're survivors. Our love is like a phoenix, forged in fire and rising from the ashes. We've been through hell to arrive at this moment together, and it's clear that Draco is now intent on burning his ownership of me into my marrow.

Our magical cores hum and glow, thrumming with the joy of finally becoming one. The ferocity of our arousal is indescribable. We've not only ignored our bond's call for several days, leaving us fevered. But this is the first time that we are naked in front of one another. Nothing is hidden. All that remains is the siren's call to sate our hunger for one another.

I yelp as Draco locks his strong arms under me, hoisting me into the air. He stomps down the hallway, unwilling to release my lips from his. We devour one another, sucking and nipping, sliding our tongues against each other to consume. I hear a *bang!* as Draco slams his forearm against our bedroom door, causing it to crash into the wall and out of our way. Then he takes two more steps before throwing me onto the bed.

"Take off your clothes," he demands while towering over me, dripping with dominance.

He shoves his hands into his pockets, lifting a cocky eyebrow and waiting for me to obey. My core throbs at the sight of it. Something about his sheer determination to have me leaves me

panting with want. I press my legs together, feeling the sticky wetness that coats my sex. Biting my lower lip, I slide my jeans down my legs, then my knickers, watching his eyes burn.

I pull his jumper over my head and reach behind me, unhooking my bra to drag it from beneath my shirt. As I do, my nipples scrape exquisitely against the fabric of one of Draco's white oxfords I grabbed when I left our penthouse. I needed to feel surrounded by him, even in our separation. Now, he watches as I tease open each of the buttons, revealing my plump breasts.

His heated gaze is intense. I lay before him naked and aroused as he drinks me in. Then Draco tilts his head back, silently ordering me to meet him at the edge of the bed. I raise to my knees following his command, but when I reach him at the end of the mattress, Draco fists my hair, guiding me to turn around and place my bare back to his clothed front.

I take a few deep breaths as he holds me, and the room's cool air kisses my skin. My whole body shivers. I'm in Draco's pull. It feels heavenly to turn off my racing mind and give in to this man's commands. I wait, aching and needy, then melt when his wide hand reaches around and cups my breast. He runs his thumb over my nipples, pinching and pulling while I whine. Then, he slides his hand up to grasp my jaw.

Tilting my head back to indicate his control, he orders, "No more running, Hermione."

When his left-hand caresses my warm skin, inching toward my core, I nod my agreement. I'm holding my breath, waiting for him to touch me.

Draco's words cause me to hum. I realize that there's no more threat to run from, no more escape needed. All I need is the strong man standing behind me.

"It's *my* job to keep you safe now. Understand?"

"Yes," I breathe.

"No more hiding. No more lying." He drops his hand to cuff my throat. "I'm your protection. You come to *me* for help from now on." I lean into him, closing my eyes and savoring his adoration. I don't need to fight anymore. I'm not alone.

Draco dips his fingers between my swollen lips and finds my thirsty clit. My knees buckle in response as he declares, "You're mine."

"Oh gods, yes," I moan.

"Good girl."

He circles my oversensitive nub as my core throbs. It feels sinful. I needed this release. I tried to push away my heavy desire, but now I realize how close I came to disaster. I even considered heading back to 2004 to seek relief. I cringe, remembering. However, Draco's fingers press harder into me, flicking and massaging me with confidence, which makes my attention shoot back to the present.

Panting with my head leaning back on his shoulder, I beg, "Fuck me."

I feel his furious need to sink into my cunt. It hammers in my chest.

"Shh. I will." His smug response does wicked things to me. "But, you're going to cum first." He circles me again. My breath hitches. "You'll need to be good and ready for me."

All time fades away as I focus on the perfect feeling of my mated partner's hand on my core. He moves with intention, knowing the exact rhythm for me to keen on his shoulder. I let go of my worries and cares, deciding that all that matters is this moment. Draco kisses my neck, smiling into my skin as I moan. He knows what he does to me.

My pulse beats in my ears as I attempt to slow my heart rate. I want to feel every touch — every second of this reunion. Suddenly, I jump as he pinches my clit, and all of my blood rushes to my pussy. Then he flattens his middle finger and rolls it against me, soothing the

ache. The combination of pain and pleasure sends me further into that space deep within my consciousness, which signals a coming explosion. Draco glides over my entrance, keeping his pressure on my clit. Then he presses two thick fingers into me, fucking me with his hand. He pumps shallow pulses in and out of my slit, reminding me of what is to come.

If it weren't for his hold, I couldn't stay upright. I rest in his embrace, feeling his clothes brush my back. It's scandalous to be this wanton in front of him. But I know it's his goal. Draco needs to direct my movements — control my pleasure. He's reinforcing the fact that I'm his. He doesn't want any more surprises. He wants to know that he will always be able to have me and protect me from here on out.

I whimper as the intensity builds. It starts as a vibration and then begins to throb. My lower abdomen clenches, and just as I'm about to cry out if I don't let go, Draco commands, "That's it, love. Go ahead."

Wave after wave of violent, thrumming euphoria overtakes me. I roll my head back and push out my straining nipples as I pulse on Draco's hand. It almost hurts. It's so good. I feel relief — unadulterated rapture. Tears catch in my eyes, and I hold my breath, waiting for the final rush to hit. Everything is sensitive.

Somewhere in the back of my awareness I hear the clinking of his belt. I'm lost to the world until Draco bends me over and penetrates me. He stretches me wide while my cunt is still clenching from his deft mastery of my body. I hear him growl as I clamp down on his invading cock. The pinch feels perfect. It reminds me that I'm alive and thriving. I'm no longer simply surviving.

I open my eyes and tilt my head to take in Draco's now naked body. I have no idea when he vanished his clothes. He's gripping the bedpost, drilling into me to seal his claim. When he catches me watching, he rolls his hips, thrusting in and out of my core. Then, he drops his hand to grab a fistful of my round ass, continuing to guide me back and forth on his phallus, thumping into my cervix.

I see a fever in his eyes that's aggressive and new. We both felt like we lost one another. It was gut-wrenching. I can tell that Draco realized our need for one another despite all odds. I wince with my cheek on the mattress as he fucks me harder. But Draco soothes me by running his hand down the back of my head. "You can take it. Just breathe."

Following his request, I pull air through my nose and hold it in my chest before slowly letting it out. I can give this to him. I can take whatever he needs from me. His intensity makes me feel warm all over. His desire for me is unending. The bed rocks as I hear the explicit sounds of Draco's cock squelching in and out of me. My desire begins to gather again, causing Draco to let out a cocky chuckle behind me.

Oh shit.

This is too much. I need to release the pressure. I need to cum. Feeling my arousal swell, Draco pulls out, flips me onto my back, then slides his velvety cock over my clit. He rests his hand over my sex, pressing my swollen lips around his shaft. It doesn't take long before I am panting again. I succumb to the rhythm of Draco's advance. It glides over me and eventually feels like waves. Draco thrusts back into me, watching as I lick my lips. I'm savoring each touch. He sets another grueling rhythm causing my tits to bounce. My body tenses, and I'm lost in the moment. It feels like an eternity of ecstasy before he finally erupts. He takes his time, drawing out every last ounce of passion. Finally, he growls out in pleasure, then slows his hips, rutting into me. He flicks my clit, sending me over the edge again. I crest my second completion while he pumps me full of his seed. Then we fall into a heap in each other's arms.

We get to know each other again over the next week. I tell Draco everything I remember about our good moments together in the future, and he tries his best to share stories with me about his work for Voldemort. However, he becomes uncomfortable, shifting in his seat or standing to pace whenever I ask him to tell me about the war. I want him to know he can share everything with me and that I'll be there to soothe his worries, but Draco has a hard time trusting me with all his dark deeds. He's too conditioned to assume I'll stop loving him, even if, logically, he knows that isn't true.

What he is able to share with me is that Voldemort uses him to hunt people down, interrogate them, and sometimes worse.

When talking about it Draco says, "He had my Godfather teach me Ligilimency and my aunt to duel. I was so eager for the role when I was younger. I thought it would —" he takes a deep breath, trailing off to stare at the roaring fire. "Anyways, it worked. There aren't many

wizards who could best me, and I can get any information I want. But, it's a curse." I grab his hand as he closes his eyes and hangs his head. "Hermione, I see everything. Their intel...and their fear. "

He seems broken. It's all I can do to pull him out of his bitter self-punishment. I straddle his lap, tilting his head back, and croon, "You're going to be okay, Draco. It's going to be okay." I kiss him and then pull back to rub the tension from his shoulders, whispering, "Thank you for telling me. I love you."

One night, we sit on the screened back porch, listening to the rain. Draco returned earlier than usual from his day doing Voldemort's bidding, which offers us more time to be together. He found me outside reading, then took my book from my hands, placing it on the table after marking my page, and sunk into me against the stone wall. Once refreshed with a quick spell, he threw on some jeans and a hoodie, but I chose to stay in knickers and one of his baggy T-shirts. Then we snuggled up together outside to enjoy the cozy evening.

Draco holds me as I pull a warm blanket over my bare legs.

"Millie in 2004 was much more timid. She treated me with kid's gloves, but she was kind." I babble as Draco listens.

"Yeah, she's a good egg. She's been asking about you, you know."

"Really?" I turn to face him. "She was so mad at me the last time that I saw her."

"Well, her friend had just died," Draco reasons, brushing my hair behind my ear. "I've tried to explain things to her, and I think she's coming around."

That makes me smile. Millie had become a friend of mine, and seeing her so hurt pained me. It's nice to hear that Draco is defending me.

"Thank you," I say, kissing him.

One side of Draco's mouth pulls back in a grimace; he rubs the back of his neck, then admits, "Well, part of her anger with you was because I came down on her so hard. That was my fault. It's the least I could do."

I turn back to stare at the garden with wide, haunted eyes. "I heard some of that." I glide my hands up and down my arms to keep warm. "You're rage, broke through my fever and woke me."

The moment feels tight and tense. It's always awkward when we talk about the incident. I search for ways to shift the subject, but Draco breaks the silence first.

"I can't imagine what I would have been upset about," Draco drawls.

His dry humor clears away the tension. I wiggle my hips, finding a comfortable position in his arms again while laughing. "Well, I don't regret it! I got to meet my younger self."

"Hermione —," Draco tilts my chin with a finger. "You will never disobey me like that again." He's stern, but gentle. We are past that kind of lying and deceit, but I know he needs to make himself understood.

I pull his palm to my lips and wrap his large hand around my cheek, agreeing, "I know Draco. You don't have to worry."

Laughing, Draco kisses my head. "Right. With you? Sure. I don't need to worry."

The evening continues with me asking to hear Draco's memories of my younger self, and him reluctantly agreeing. Though, it is clear that he holds no affection for her. Using the method I worked out with Remus, he tells me stories. But they always hold a tinge of irritation. I was either annoying for besting everyone in my studies or pompous and swotty.

"And, she *punched* me in our third year!" Draco blurts out.

"What?" I ask, shocked. "Why??"

Draco suddenly looks sheepish. He shrugs, "She uh, had her reasons."

At one point, I have to remind him that I *am* her, to which he kisses me and argues, "No you're not."

Everything feels right again. We're together and happy, tucked away from the world. Life becomes easy. We fuck, talk, read, make delicious food together, and Draco even brings over our violins. It is a much-needed break from all the craziness surrounding us.

And then it finally happens. I walk into the kitchen at breakfast and stop in my tracks.

Draco sits at the counter, eating eggs and reading through a brief. His fork stops in midair when he hears me gasp.

"What is it?" He darts his eyes back and forth in suspicion.

"Wait here," I say, then run back to the bedroom and grab our wedding photo. When I bring it back to the kitchen, I have one hand over my mouth, and my eyes are wide. I hadn't noticed until I saw him.

Draco takes the picture, then drags his eyes over himself, then me, before laughing.

"Well, that settles it." He sets down his fork. "Let's go do this. It's about time."

We are both wearing precisely the same outfits as our photographic selves. It's too much to be a coincidence. Everything is the same, even down to the way I styled my hair.

Neither of us can keep the joy and laughter out of our eyes as we Apparate to the top of the mountain, make our vows, and then capture the now-famous shot. The moment feels lighthearted and free until Draco gazes at me and commits to love and honor me for the rest of his life. My throat catches in my chest, and my heart stops beating. Nothing is funny anymore. Suddenly, we are two people, madly in love, declaring ourselves to each other as the wind whips around us.

Draco cups my jaw, brushing his thumb over my cheekbone, professing, "Hermione, I've known for a long time that you were it for me. Whatever happens, I promise to cherish, and protect you, until the day I die." He has to work to get through the word 'protect.' It's his way of letting me know that I will never again know the monster that chased me into his arms. That Draco is dead. "You were right. We *are* star-crossed lovers. I would follow you throughout this time and the next as long as I could be with you. From this day forward, I will never leave your side."

"Draco," I pledge, "You're all I've ever known of love and desire. You're all I need, all I want. I know there is a perfect ending for us. We're strong. Whatever life throws at us, I know we will overcome it as long as we are together." His eyes bore into mine as I speak my truth. "When we reunited here, I fell in love with you, earnestly. Not fabricated love, not forced from the bond, but real, honest love. Whatever I went through, it brought me here to you, and for that I am grateful beyond words. As long as I have breath, I will be yours. You are good and worthy — just as you are. I love you."

When he pulls me forward by the back of my neck and bends to kiss me, everything near us begins to shimmer. He lifts his wand, grasps my forearm, places the wand's tip to my skin, and declares, "Now and forever, I bind my life to yours."

"Now and forever, I bind my life to yours," I whisper, moved beyond words.

Gold bands of magic crawl up our bodies and shine for all to witness. They glow, making my heart warm. Then, with a surge of magic, the cords dive into us, disappearing and binding us together. Our bond intensifies as if it is concentrated as soon as it happens.

I take a step back, casting my gaze from my chest to his, and notice Draco doing the same.
"Did you see that?"

"Yes. Do you feel it?" He places a hand on his heart.

"Yes," I breathe.

Then, our eyes smolder as we stare at one another.

"Fuck," Draco groans, running his hands through his hair. "I thought our bond was insufferable *before*." We both laugh. "How am I ever going to get any rest now!?"

We kiss, feeling the weight of everything we just experienced. Then, before we Apparate back to the villa, I tuck the photo into his pocket. It is shiny and new, not crumpled like mine.
"Here," I say, kissing him once more. "You keep this one."

Draco and I consummate our renewed bond, barely making it indoors before tearing each other's clothes off. However, our joy is short-lived. As soon as we exit the shower, hand in hand, Voldemort summons him. I watch as Draco tightens his fist and cringes from the call. His eyes fall. It is time to leave our bubble of security and get back to the real world.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Draco pulls on his robes and kisses me before leaving. "I love you."

I kiss him back and hold the edge of the door as I watch him walk into the yard to Apparate back into danger. My stomach is in knots, and I feel sick. I have a new sinking feeling.

The grandfather clock next to me chimes ten o'clock. Draco left several hours ago. I've been a witch on a mission ever since.

If we got married, there is only one week until the Battle on Hogwarts, and the accident.

So, I'm elbows deep in books and notes, trying to determine how to fix our future.

Chapter 23: Time

Chapter Summary

"Round and around and around and around we go
Oh, now tell me now, tell me now, tell me now you know
Not really sure how to feel about it
Something in the way you move
Makes me feel like I can't live without you
It takes me all the way
I want you to stay"
-Stay, Rihanna

By the time Draco finally arrives back at the villa, I've sketched out several scenarios. There's a nervous energy that I'm trying to control like the answer to our *time* problem is within reach if I can just find the right combination of variables. The front door creaks, causing me to cringe and lift my head from my notes. I promised not to hide anything from Draco anymore, but figuring out how to approach the upcoming battle and aftermath will be challenging for us.

As his footsteps rumble down the hall, I turn from the little desk in the corner of our bedroom, ready to greet him. Draco pushes open the door, looking exhausted. When he sees that I'm still up, he pulls a small, knowing smile, but it doesn't meet his eyes.

"Hermione, it's after three o'clock in the morning. You didn't need to wait up for me."

I shrug, "You know I can't sleep when you're away."

Draco crosses the room to kiss my forehead. He must have been doing something awful on Voldemort's behalf because I see the haunted shadows in his expression. This is the moment where I would typically help him forget his day by offering up my body or pulling him to bed for a good night's rest. But instead, I shift in my seat, preparing myself for the upcoming rocky conversation.

Sitting tall, I brush my hands down my arms and legs, straighten my clothes, and open my mouth. However, before I have a chance to speak he says, "I need to shower." Draco hangs his robe in the closet and pulls his shirt over his head on the way to the door. Before reaching the hall he turns back to me, ordering with an upward tilt of his head. "Go to bed, I'll meet you there."

I roll my lips and smile at him. Neither of us is going to sleep yet, but I'll let him clean up before I break the news to him. As he showers, I pull out notes and flick through stacks of parchment on the desk, readying myself. I'll need to present my findings carefully for us to agree on the best solution. He comes back twenty minutes later wearing sleep trunks and a plain white t-shirt. At first, Draco scans the bed, assuming he'll find me there. Then he shifts his gaze back to the desk where I'm waiting.

He stills.

His eyes narrow and I sense him checking in with my feelings through the bond.

"What's going on?" Draco's tone is guarded.

"We need to talk. I've been thinking all night."

He's instantly on edge, wondering what I might say. He drops his head to rub the bridge of his nose, then shoves his hands in his pockets, nodding.

"I want to tell you everything." I keep my voice light to make the conversation easier, but it sounds forced.

"I thought we already went over *everything*," he growls.

I hurry to explain. "We did! But yesterday made me realize something."

"Go on." Draco sounds clipped and angry.

"You said you wanted to change the future, right?"

He lifts his eyebrows, bracing himself, not speaking but indicating that I should continue.

"Well, then we need to decide how we will *do* that?"

"Tonight?" He's incredulous.

I can hear how tired he is, and I know he doesn't want to talk about this now, but our time is running out. So I offer, "We got married yesterday." Draco scowls as I state the obvious. "Everything is happening like we knew it would. That means that the final battle is a few days away. We don't have much time to figure out our plan."

Giving in to the idea that this may be a longer discussion than he hoped, Draco walks over to the bar cart in the corner near the window and pours himself a tall glass of something expensive-looking. The bottle is thick, green glass with an ancient label, and his tumbler is made of cut crystal. He takes a sip and then says, "There's been no movement to suggest that a battle is approaching. Potter went underground again."

"Okay, but we *know* that the battle happens one week after we marry on Grasmoor."

Draco stares me down. "Hermione, we don't *know* anything but the garbage lies my evil twin fed you. Yesterday was amazing, but I'm not going to get all worked up about looming dangers just because of some outfits we happened to wear."

I ignore his blatant denial, barreling on because, in my estimation, we have very little time left to make a decision. "Draco, what's our plan? How are we going to handle the events of next week?"

He knocks back the rest of his drink, sets it on the cart, stomps forward to wind his fingers into my hair, and tilts my head. I feel his anger growing. Draco's voice is chilly as he asserts, "We aren't going to handle anything! *If* the battle occurs, we will find a safe place for you to wait, and once the dust settles, you'll stay here with me like you have been for the past year. We're changing the future by writing a new one."

"So, I'm never going back to 2004?" I huff.

Draco's eyes burn. They narrow as if I've said something volatile. "Is that even a question?"

Well, this conversation started about as smoothly as I imagined. Yes, it's a question! I may have wanted to stay with him in this time period when the idea was theoretical, but now things are real, and we have to make hard choices.

Draco wonders why we need to talk about this now, but it's clear it could take us more than a week to straighten everything out. I shake my head to release his hold on my hair, then sit taller, asking, "So, there's just going to be two of me walking around forever? What if my younger self dies in the battle? What if —?"

Draco interrupts, "Fine, then we send *her* to the future. I don't give a fuck. All I know is that you're staying with me." He kicks off his shoes and heads to bed, obviously over this conversation.

"Come on! That's ridiculous. How does that work?"

"I don't care. I'm tired and I don't have the energy for this shit."

I don't know how much further I can push him tonight, but I'm keyed up from a day's worth of research and study.

"Your bloody boss will win the war if we do nothing."

That does it. Our conversation shoots from irritating Draco to stopping him in his tracks. His back is to me, and he doesn't turn around. He's suddenly tense.

The dim light of the sconces somehow turns from cozy to ominous. I continue, though, knowing that I need to let him know what I'm thinking in order to be truthful with him.

"I might have found a way to defeat him," I stutter because I know what kind of impact my words will have.

The air thickens between us. My words were like setting off a bomb. Draco inches around to face me, offering a command in the scariest voice I've ever heard him use.

"This conversation is over."

I sense his barely held-back rage through the bond. The idea of attempting to defeat Voldemort must feel even more perilous now that we've solidified our commitment to one another. Draco knows as well as anyone how dangerous the evil wizard is, so he refuses to entertain any ideas that would put us at risk.

"Okay," I whisper.

It's no use pushing the issue. Draco is too mad and tired to keep talking. I concede defeat, hoping that he will be calmer in the morning. Standing, I turn the key to extinguish the oil lamp on the desk. Then, I trudge to my side of the bed with my head hung low, scowling at my feet. As I crawl in, he casts a Nox on the sconces.

Despite the warm evening, the sheets feel cold, so I pull the covers under my chin. A few minutes later the bed dips as Draco lays down. He doesn't say anything else to me, so I follow his lead. I wait, staring into the room's darkness, feeling him take several deep breaths to calm his nerves. Thankfully, after a few minutes, Draco reaches out for me and guides my head to his chest so our bond can soothe our anxious moods. We didn't have the night either

of us envisioned, but we both know our love is strong enough to withstand this disagreement.

I get a fitful few hours of sleep as anxious scenarios bounce around in my subconscious. I wake, aware that I tossed and turned all night. Stretching, I see Draco dressed and standing with his back to me, reading over the many pieces of parchment that I scribbled notes on yesterday.

"Hey," I say as a greeting while combing my fingers through my hair and securing it in a low ponytail.

"Good morning."

Draco keeps his eyes on the list he's reading. So, I sit up to lean against the headboard, waiting to see how he'll react. When he doesn't say anything, I break the silence.

"How long can you stay this morning?" I ask, trying to find out how much time we have to go over what we started talking about last night. Part of the problem is that Draco's time is limited. He's always being called away and often doesn't know when he'll return.

I watch his shoulders rise and fall as he takes a deep breath, then drops the parchment back onto the desk before walking over to meet me. I scooch over, making room so he can sit on the edge of the bed. Scrutinizing his features, I decide that Draco looks calmer but still stern.

"I don't have any orders yet for today."

"Good. Let's go eat, I'll make breakfast and we can chat."

I push back the sheets, getting ready to stand, but Draco places a hand on my leg. His deep voice slows me down as he says, "I know we need to talk more about our plans — "

That sounds positive. At least he isn't going to shut me down again. Progress!

"Make breakfast, witch. I'll help. Then we can look over your notes together. But Hermione, I'm not entertaining any idea that puts you at risk or separates us from one another."

I smile, leaning forward and rising to my knees to kiss him, happy for the change in his mood. "Well, let's just look at all the variables. Okay? Then we can make an informed decision together."

Draco growls, "Variables, right."

Thirty minutes later, we're sitting outside on the screened porch, with plates of toast, poached eggs, and fresh berries each. There are also two steaming cups of tea and a mound of parchment. The air refreshes us both. I appreciate the breeze because I've been cooped up inside over the past year. It's a welcome break.

Daffodils and tulips line the garden wall by the road. Their beauty soothes my soul. I'm not looking forward to the confusing journey ahead and ache to end up in a happy future with Draco, but I need his help to sort it all out.

"So, listen, Draco," I start, and he scowls. "There are a few things I pieced together while we were apart that I need to discuss with you. I want to be as open as possible. And I want to make the best decision for us, but I need your help." I grab his hand to emphasize my point. "You know I love you, and of course, I want to stay with you forever, but we need to review all the factors at play."

Draco leans back in his chair and takes a deep breath. "Alright, Hermione. Just tell me what you're thinking about. But, I've already made myself clear."

I take one more bite of toast, wipe my hands on my napkin, and pull out one of the sheets of paper.

"Here's what we know."

Draco interrupts, correcting me. "Here's what we've been told by several unreliable sources."

I pause staring at him with a deadpan look. Then Draco waves his hand toward the parchment, silently handing the floor back to me.

With the way this conversation is starting, I probably shouldn't dive right into the information I received on Horcruxes or Hallows. I want to keep him talking, so I bring up the other details first.

"I don't have any memories from the past. What I *can* recall starts roughly one year before I discovered that you were holding me captive." I flip through some notes as I talk, remembering an important detail. " Though you told me that I'd been with you for six years, newspapers corroborated that the year was 2004."

"Do not refer to that bastard as *me*," Draco spits.

The air stills, and I whip my head up to meet his gaze. My heart aches because I can feel how upset Draco suddenly became. He has to work very hard not to shame himself for what he saw in my memories, and I've been constantly telling him that those were not *his* actions. We are both finding it hard to reconcile all of this.

"No, of course not. Sorry."

I run my fingers over the notes on the page, lost in my jumbled thoughts. I don't continue, so Draco shifts in his seat and holds his hand to me. We stare at each other for a second, and then I place my palm in his, letting him guide me to his lap.

When I'm comfortable in his hold, Draco kisses me, saying, "Love, you haven't realized yet, but I recognize the pattern." That statement draws my curiosity. I pull back to take in his

features, waiting for him to explain what he means. "Our commitment ceremony on Grasmoor set a fire under your feet, and now you're treating this situation like an academic problem you must solve." He points at the pile of papers. "You've designed theoretical experiments and plotted out various competing hypotheses." He kisses my temple. "It's like you're preparing for one of Vector's end-of-year exams. You're far more like your younger self than you sometimes realize."

"I am?" I stare at him, shocked. "You're the one who keeps saying we're so different," I argue. Then, I lower my voice and add, "And you don't like her."

"No," he soothes, "She's not all bad. I'm sorry. In fact, it's pretty cute when you get all frantic about some challenge." He kisses me, which helps to ease my self-consciousness. However, before our lips part, the tension between us returns. He reaches to hold my chin.

"But we are not *theories*. This is not an exciting thought exercise. I'll discuss this with you, but understand that every possibility has potentially heartbreaking consequences. Please give this the weight it deserves." He brushes a flyaway hair behind my ear. "We're discussing our *lives* here — our future health and happiness."

I take a slow, deep breath and agree—Draco's right. I've compartmentalized this data, turning it into facts and research. When I think about what these possibilities could mean, my breath catches. Somehow, walling off the reality of what's about to happen to us and making it an academic process feels more comfortable to me. But this situation isn't hypothetical.

Satisfied by my change in demeanor, Draco reaches over my shoulder to pull the parchment I was reading towards us then says, "Okay, go on."

We spend the next several hours combing through the data that we have at hand, and ultimately decide that there are three options.

Either all the information we have is flexible and ever-changing, some of the information is correct and fixed, or all of the information is correct. Our actions have already been scripted

in time.

If there's no script, we can make it up as we go along. This scenario turns out to be Draco's new favorite idea. He's never been a fan of feeling like our story is pre-destined and has always preferred to believe that we have control over our actions.

"You've made shit up all along and you're still here," he argues while we work. "You told me all sorts of lies."

For the sake of the debate, I agree, but there is too much evidence to suggest otherwise to make me feel at ease. Especially since if we decide this option is our working theory, we still have to figure out what to do with my younger self. *And* all of our next steps are a mystery. We don't know how or when the war ends. We don't know how to reconcile the two versions of myself existing in the same realm. But, the most disturbing idea with this train of thought is that if things don't continue as I know them, how would I make sure to end up here in the past at all? What if either one of us dies? Or, what if any number of the details change? I might just vanish at some point. The thought is terrifying.

Even though Draco is decidedly colder when discussing other options, I lead us forward, dragging some of the other piles of parchment toward us and pushing our empty plates aside.

"Look, some of the information I had *was* correct. That's a fact." Draco's body tenses behind me, but I keep talking. "Remus told me that Harry went to Godddric's Hollow and got out alive — which was true."

"Yes, *you* survived, thankfully," Draco drawled.

I ignore him, pointing at another scribbled note. "And, Remus said that we would be captured and brought to Malfoy Manor but that, once again, we would escape."

When the incident is mentioned, Draco turns to ice. "Did Lupin tell you that Bellatrix tortured your younger self?"

"Yes!"

"And, did he tell you that your time-travelling savior would offer herself up, accepting the torture, and nearly getting herself killed?"

I can feel his anger growing, so I mumble, "No, but —"

"Then changing details doesn't have to be catastrophic." Draco is trying his best to remain calm while discussing one of the worst moments of our lives. He knows the answers to all his questions, having seen the truth in my memories, but he's intent on making his point.

The idea that some of the information was correct but that making small changes might still lead to the same outcome is appealing. I like that option better because it would mean we have more of a playbook to follow and can strategically make the necessary changes. But it still leaves a lot of holes. Mainly the biggest one, do I ever go back to my time? If not, how does that work?

After lunch, Draco's agitation grows. He doesn't want to even entertain the third option.

"It's not possible, Hermione," he growls. "You realize that if all the information you have is correct then all the *trauma* is too?" He shifts me to face him. "Do you really think I could wipe your mind? Keep you prisoner?"

I shake my head. "No, I don't! But let's still think it through. What would it mean *if* that were the case?" I plead.

Standing, Draco paces and says through clenched teeth. "Then the future-me would need to be Imperiused. Knowing what I know now, I would never do that to you." He stares at the table strewn with papers and plates as if it offends him. Then he pulls out his wand and vanishes the dishes to the kitchen because he needs to control *something* to appease his increasing sense of unease.

"Maybe, you are!" I perk up at this idea. I hadn't thought of that possibility before. "Who would have cast it then? And why?" I ask, flipping through the notes again. "It would explain why sometimes you were *you* and other times you weren't."

He stops and stares me down, saying while fisting his wand, "The wizard would have needed to be close to me. You can't hold an Imperious indefinitely. It would need to be re-cast again and again."

"Yes, who could have done that?" I whisper, staring at the parchment, not realizing Draco's rising irritation.

"No one. There's no reason why anyone would do that, Hermione. The Dark Lord has other ways of motivating his followers."

I'm lost in this new idea, hardly hearing Draco. "And, then why did your older self send me back in time? What did he want me to bring back to 2004? He said something about finishing what we started."

There's no mistaking the caustic tension between us after I finish thinking out loud. I feel it twist in my stomach and shiver up my back. Noticing, I lift my head towards Draco to find him standing over me, furious.

"Bring back?" he seethes.

"Draco —," I caution, hoping to calm his nerves and get him to entertain the idea, even if to simply rule it out.

There's a long silence where we both check in with the bond to understand better what the other is feeling.

"Hermione, where's the time-turner?"

Suddenly, we're no longer discussing options. Draco's cold voice stops me in my tracks.

Shit.

"Why?" I ask, averting my eyes.

"Witch, you better not lie to me." I watch him wave his wand, summoning the golden top as I bite my lower lip. He isn't going to like what he discovers. "Are you considering any options that send you back to 2004?"

When the time-turner doesn't appear, his eyes narrow. I rise from my chair to meet him by the wall, placing a hand on his chest. "Draco, I'm being realistic. I don't have any idea what needs to happen yet and I want to make the right decision." I lift my hand to his jaw, imploring, "Please listen. I do *not* want to go back to 2004! I *want* to stay with you. But, we have to leave all options open until we know what's best."

I'm telling him the truth. I have no desire to return to hell. But Draco has a history of throwing his weight around to get what he wants. He locks doors and steals wands. He isn't afraid to do what he needs to do to direct my movements. And, in this situation, I can't let him keep the time-turner away from me. Even if I don't use it — which I hope is the case — I need to have a say.

He brushes my hand away from his jaw to cuff my upper arm, then snarls. "Where is the time-turner?"

Chapter 24: Doppelganger

Chapter Summary

I'm not quite sure how to breathe
without you here
I'm not quite sure if I'm ready to say good bye
to all we were
Be with me
Stay with me
Just for now, let the time decide
when I won't need you
-Need, Hana Pestle

"I hid it."

Draco's eyes burn with anger while he grasps my arm tighter.

"What the hell are you playing at, Hermione?"

Tensions rise when he leans forward, pinning me to my place with his gaze and reaching for his wand. There's a split second where it looks like he's about to force his way into my mind. I know that he wants to find my memory of stashing the turner. When I catch it, my eyes blow wide in shock, then narrow to slits. My look could kill as I dare him to use Ligillimency on me again.

Draco backs down. We both know I would annihilate him if he tried to invade my privacy like before. He won't risk my wrath unless he feels there's no other option.

"Go get it. Now," he snarls.

"I'm not doing that, Draco. Calm down. Let's agree on a plan first. Then I'll retrieve it."

I roll back my shoulders and stand taller, relying on my courage as I realize I'm technically facing down one of Voldemort's top assassins.

"Hermione —" his tone is like ice.

I yank my arm from his hold. "I'm not *playing at* anything. I promise I won't use it without talking it through with you first."

"You will not use it. Period!"

Draco is coming undone. He's about to revert to his authoritative pattern of ordering me around. To avoid the impending trainwreck, I plead, "Stop. Draco, sit back down." I hold his jaw and rise to my tiptoes to kiss him. I can almost taste his bitter mood.

There is another charged moment when I drop back down to the ground. Then, Draco closes his eyes to check in with the bond. As he senses my sincerity, he scowls, lets out a frustrated sigh, and then pulls me to him again by the back of my neck to deepen our kiss. Anger, passion, and love are evident in how he asserts his dominance. When he pulls away, my heart flutters and my cheeks are flushed.

I clear my throat, flustered but smiling, as I watch Draco offer a knowing, arrogant smirk.

Somewhere, far off in the distance, I hear a sheep bleating. I catch my breath and readjust my clothes while staring at the messy patio table. The air feels damp from the many recent spring rains.

Seeing Draco's anger dissipate, I pull him towards the wicker loveseat that has become our new preferred place to curl up. "How did you have it in the first place?" I continue, hoping to ease over our argument, "Or do you have several?"

I haven't asked him before now because the fact that Draco left the time-turner out for me still hurts.

He sits and then guides me to lean against him, tucking me under his arm. "I found it the day you arrived."

"Really?" I twist to face him, shocked.

He nods. "When I came up to the third floor looking for a place to escape, I slammed the door open and saw it glinting as it rolled under the dresser." He's still irritated, but at least he's talking. "I vanished it to my room downstairs, curious but too on edge to give it much thought. It was only later that I was able to examine it thoroughly. When I did, I realized how powerful a magical object it was." He shifts, turning me to face the screened windows again, and holds me. The steady comfort of his heavy arms surround me. "It helped to make the case that you were telling the truth about time travel — even if I didn't want to believe you."

"So there's only one?"

Draco hums his tense response. "Mhmm."

Thank the gods. The last thing I need is several time-turners floating around, causing various complications. I think about the one we have, tucked away in my beaded bag and charmed not to respond to a summoning spell. I'm glad I had the forethought to add that extra layer of protection. It took Draco roughly ten seconds to attempt to Accio it away from me.

"And you had it all that time?" Now, it's my turn to sound harsh. "I hope you realize how hypocritical your anger is then," I grump, picking a piece of fuzz off my sweater.

Draco's shoulders drop before he admits, "I wanted to be in control of how long you stayed and when you went back. It presented such a powerful advantage. At first I worried that you would use it against me somehow. Then later, I feared you would use it to leave me."

I cross my arms and lean forward. "But you determined it was time for me to go after we argued the other day?"

My skin tingles as Draco runs his thumb over my side, comforting me. His hand is under my shirt, holding my waist.

"I was mad. I'm sorry, Hermione. That was awful of me." Our bond warms with his apology. "I lashed out, but I never really wanted you to use it. When I came back to the penthouse that night to find it empty I was gutted. I thought that you were gone. I couldn't believe I had made such a horrific choice."

He kisses the top of my head, then nuzzles his face into my neck, taking a deep breath. "It was only after watching your memories that I was finally able to breathe again. When I realized you hadn't left, it felt like a lifeline."

Draco's reiteration of his commitment to me melts our remaining tension. Once again, I thank heaven that he had a change of heart from the anger he showed me the night before I left. Everything felt so dire then, but now I'm overcome by his admission. I rise, pick up his hand, and stare at him through my lashes as I pull him towards our bedroom.

The wood of the desk feels cool on my warm skin. I'm flat on my back, and Draco is lodged within me. My body is loose as I'm riding the final waves of the mind-numbing release that he just coaxed out of me with his tongue. My legs are wrapped around his wide hips, helping to press him deeper with each plunge of his rock-hard shaft into my sensitive core. Draco takes his time, luxuriating in the way my warm cunt encases his cock. His arousal is mirrored back to me across the bond. It makes my nipples pebble and my toes curl. He reaches out his corded forearm and slides his hand under my head to fist my hair. His need to consume me sends shivers across my lower abdomen.

Suddenly, Draco freezes and then roars out in anger and frustration.

His hand tightens in my hair as a reflex to the jolt of pain he just felt. It causes my eyes to water as I wince from the sting.

Voldemort is calling.

Draco pumps three more times before roaring his release — half on fire from the raging orgasm and half devastated that Voldemort takes everything from him, even his moments of pleasure.

"*Fuck!*" he bellows.

I hate this evil wizard and everything that he does to hurt the love of my life. Draco feels beholden to him, afraid that any deviance from an order will end in disaster. My body tenses with grief, and I watch the sadness in my husband's eyes. I wish I could do more to protect him. I wish I could end this godforsaken war with Voldemort dead and our safety guaranteed. But, right now, I need to hold him and be held. Still seated within me, Draco pulls me forward to press my naked body to his. We cling together, shaking from the injustice. He strokes the back of my head and shutters while kissing my lips, forehead, and temple. We radiate with anxiety. The timing and inconvenience of Voldemort's summons feel significant. It isn't just that Draco needs to leave so soon after making love to me. That's awful. But our aching desperation comes from the fact that Draco must leave before finishing our critical conversation.

He releases me and then stomps to the closet to dress, so I cleanse myself and pull on his shirt hanging on the chair beside me. When Draco exits, draped in his Death Eater robes, he breathes, "Hermione —. " He runs his hand through his hair as his voice dies. He can't get out everything that he needs to tell me.

"I won't do anything," I promise.

He stands in the doorway, ramrod straight, pulsing with tension.

"If you do, Hermione," His silver eyes smolder as he warns. "I will never forgive you."

He speaks with a scary, calm assurance. He isn't threatening me. He isn't yelling. He is simply speaking his truth. If I go back to 2004, it will be the final straw. We won't recover from that scenario. It would mean that I'd toss him aside like everyone else.

He stares at me for a moment longer. Somehow, we both know this goodbye may last more than a few hours. I meet him at the door and gently press my lips to his.

"I'll wait up," I offer, running my hands along his neck, attempting to comfort us both.

And then he's gone.

I watch the sunset, curled into a tight ball with my knees to my chest. The beautiful hues of gold and orange don't match my sour mood. Voldemort called Draco back into service six days ago, and he hasn't returned. Millie arrived to tell me that Voldemort stationed him at Hogwarts to guard something. She then stayed to keep me company as my skin crawled more and more each day.

I bounce my leg beneath the table while biting my thumbnail. I'm clutching a note from Draco that arrived an hour ago by owl.

You will not step one foot outside the wards for ANY reason.

I want to obey him. I really do. But I've had nothing but time over the past week to obsess about our plans, and I can't see any other solution. Too many predictions came true. Draco and I met in 1997. We fell in love while he hid me in his home for a year. No one other than Millie saw us together. My younger self went with Harry Potter to Godric's Hollow and escaped Voldemort. Even the *incident* happened, as Remus explained. The younger Hermione was captured and tortured at Malfoy Manor before escaping again. Sure, it was *me* that Bellatrix actually tortured, but Remus wouldn't have known that. We married one week ago on Grassmor, and now it's clear that the battle is starting.

The eerie thing is that even my lies came true. Draco and I *did* reunite while Death Eaters cornered me, and he *did* bring me to a small cottage where we got to know one another.

I hang my head between my knees, then rub at my shoulders, trying to cast away my anxious energy. All of that information can only mean one thing.

One version of me needs to have her mind wiped. One of us needs to go live with Draco's evil other half. That all must happen so that I can end up here.

The Draco from 2004 sent me back in time to fall in love with him. I'm sure more than ever now that he expects me to return. But I'm not going to do that. The only viable solution in my mind is that we need to wipe the memories of my younger self and allow her to be given to the future Draco, just like he said I was after the battle.

However, I'm changing the ending. I'm not going back. After I make sure that the younger Hermione is headed for my fate, I'm going to grab Draco and run. We will write the beautiful end to our story that *we* want. Sending Hermione there will sentence her to six years of suffering and torment, but things will get better once she lands back in 1997. Once, *I* land back in 1997. This is all so confusing. Especially since we are entering the cyclical part of time that I both have memories of and will try to change for the better. I can't think about the parallel realities too much. It becomes more jumbled the harder I try to pin everything down.

The only troubling situation is that I must give up my plans to take Voldemort down. I may have most of the information needed to end his reign, but I don't have all of it. I know about the Horcruxes. I know there are seven, but I have no idea what they all are or if my younger self, Harry, and Ron found any.

And I made another discovery. I realized the significance of the Deathly Hallows. They're tools that can be used to kill Voldemort once he is mortal again. Not only that, but I have two of them! I clutch the beaded bag that I brought from the future. Inside is the black stone portkey that I'm sure is the resurrection stone. I can feel its strong, magical properties when I hold it in my palm. I realized this when I reached into the bag to reassure myself that the time-turner still lay in its depths. When I did, I felt the turner, the stone, and a touch of something else. Excited, I rubbed the gossamer fabric between my fingers before pulling out the Cloak of Invisibility. The fact that I had the two objects with me couldn't have been a

coincidence. I've been collecting these powerful magical objects for a year now. The only Hallow that I don't have is the wand. But from what Draco told me about Voldemort, I know he has it.

There's no way I'm getting an unbeatable wand away from a wizard like Voldemort, so I'll need to give up the hope of killing him. It's impossible.

I can feel Draco's anxiety through the bond. I sense his movements as if I can see him pacing around in the school's corridors, keeping a close watch on my location and mood.

The time has come. We have to act.

"Millie?"

I hear her shuffle out from the kitchen and watch as she wipes her hands on her apron. "Yes, Mrs?" She stares at me with round, sad eyes because she knows Draco and I are incredibly stressed. She can sense the intensity of the moment.

"I need you to get a message to Draco. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she squeaks. "I can get in and out of the castle. Mrs. Narcissa sends me to give him messages. He-who-must-not-be-named allows it."

I let out a deep sigh of relief. Then I turn, sit up, and place my feet on the ground. "Tell him that for me to stay, we need to send *her* into his arms. Ask him to find her in the battle and bring her to the forest. We need to —" my voice cracks. I still can't believe I'm going to go through with this. "We need to Oblivate her. She needs to be captured." Millie's eyebrows furrow, and her ears droop in fear. "But promise him that I won't leave him. I need to come to the forest to do it myself, but I *will not* use the time-turner."

Millie narrows her eyes as her body tenses. "You not lying to me?"

I grab her hands in mine. Her petite body looks frail, but I know her spirit is strong. Her eyes drop to my forearm, where bright red, angry letters are visible, reminding us of the last time I asked for a favor from her. "I swear it on my life. I'm not tricking you."

With a terse nod of her head, she vanishes.

While waiting, I tidy up the porch, bring a tea cup and saucer to the kitchen, and straighten the stack of books on the end table. I try to slow my breathing. With too much pent-up energy, I make my way to the bedroom and put on a clean set of clothes — white boy-cut knickers with a matching bra, a fresh pair of jeans, and a navy blue, long-sleeved, waffle-knit shirt. Next, I walk to the bathroom, run water over my face, and pull my hair back into a high ponytail.

There's a *Crack!* and Millie scurries into the bedroom to find me. My hands shake, hoping that Draco will let me help him. I need to be there when it happens. I need to comfort her. I need to cast the spell. I can't explain it, but being the person to wipe her memories feels like the only option to me. I take a deep breath, finding a slight sense of peace, knowing I did it all along. In a way, it feels like I am choosing my path rather than someone attacking me like I always thought. I close my eyes briefly, trying to hone in on his mood. It's guarded and stern.

"Master says to give me the time-turner. I is supposed to bring it to him."

"What else did he say?" I want to hear how he reacted to my plan. I assume he'll be pleased with me, but I feel a creeping sense of unease over what's about to happen.

"Nothing. He just tell me to get the turner."

It's a test. There's no way in hell Draco will let me step onto a battlefield while still hiding the time-turner from him. I walk to the bedside table and pull out my beaded bag. After extracting the shiny gold top, I return and place it in her hands.

"Here."

She smiles at me, relieved. Then I plead, "Millie, tell him that I *need* to come."

Draco won't want me there, and I pray he'll agree. She leaves again and is back faster this time. Holding out her hand, she says, "Master Draco says I can bring you to the castle, but that you are to stay under cover at the edge of the forest." That news is so relieving that I lean forward, attempting to grab her hands. But she pulls away and points a bony finger in my face. "He say, you cannot join any part of the battle, and as soon you both do what you need to do you are to come right back here."

I drop my shoulders, happy that he understood. I sense his agitation soften now that I gave him the turner. I know he must be grateful that I gave it up if he's going against his instincts of keeping me as far from the battle as possible. I'm trusting him, and he's begrudgingly offering trust back.

I nod and take her hand, then we twist, landing in the familiar woods.

The edge of the woods are eerie as mist hangs low above the ground. There's a span of about 15 meters where the trees are less dense as the forest transitions to the grounds of Hogwarts. I feel safer here. Any closer to the edge, and I worry that someone will see me. Any further in, I run the risk of encountering a creature or beast that I'm not prepared to fight off.

My heart slams against my ribcage as I await Draco. From the looks of the quiet castle, nothing has started yet. Flickering candles are in the windows, and the stone seems to glow. I can almost picture what the inside might look like and how I walked the halls. Not for the first time, my stomach tightens with the grief of not knowing. But then I throw my hand to my chest and suck in a quick breath realizing I am about to be the cause of that grief. Hell is about to break out. The war is about to end, securing Voldemort the win, and In the middle of the raging battle, Draco needs to intercept my younger self and then bring her here so that we can carry out an indefensible act. I can't believe that I've designed this plan. I sacrificed myself to keep her safe, and now I am sending her into a nightmare. But it's the only option that makes sense and allows Draco and I to stay together. Older Draco can go to hell. He can die alone for all I care.

Just then, I hear a twig crack behind me. I whip around to see Draco's dark figure emerge from the forest. What is he doing!? I sigh in frustration. I haven't seen him in a week, so I'm dripping with the need to touch him, but I also know that this meet-up is risky.

He stalks into the light as I glance over my shoulder to ensure no one will catch us together. "How did you get over there?" I ask, tapping my wand against my folded arms and calculating how much time we have. This can't take too long. Harry, Ron, and I should be arriving at any minute.

Just as I'm about to shoo him away, I catch the heat in his eyes and know. Time slows as he gazes at me with a covetousness that rolls off his commanding frame. The world is falling down around us, and our shaky plan might crumble at any moment. We need to reassure one another that everything will be okay before attempting the most dangerous and idiotic plan yet.

"Hermione," he breathes in reverence.

The dark forest casts shadows over our features. But I can feel the sizzling desire clawing at him; it's visceral. Draco and I have spent too many days apart. We're on edge. We need to connect and draw strength from one another to do what tonight requires of us. The battle and our future hang in the balance.

So, I run to him.

I know what he needs. I see it in his shadowy gaze — feel it in my bones.

"Quick, we don't have much time," I mewl.

I jump into his arms, wrap my legs around his middle and suck on his neck.

Draco places his hand on the back of my head, breathing me in. His chest rises and falls, and our bond sings. He's cataloging my very scent to sear it into his core memories. It feels like we've been separated for an eternity. His hold is cold from our long absence. I suddenly feel a need to warm him. To let him know that he's loved and that he's mine. I want to convince him that we're making the right decision. I feel him shake as he holds me, pulling back to stare at me with pure awe as if he's seeing me for the first time.

Slowly, he tightens his grasp of my curls, then bends my neck back, raising my eyes to the trees. Caught in his control, he dips his head to place a blistering kiss on my waiting lips. Fuck, this man is so hot. The way that he lays claim to my body is perfect. He causes me to shiver with desire.

But time is ticking.

"Please, Draco, hurry. I need you inside me."

As soon as I moan my shameless plea, he shivers with barely restrained desire. Draco slashes his wand toward the ground, almost violently casting the spell to remove my pants. He's feral. He rips my panties to the side, then, as soon as the cool night air licks my cunt, he pulls out his cock, to drill into my drenched channel.

My thin shirt barely protects my back from the rough bark as Draco ruts into me.

It doesn't make sense to fuck right now. It's dangerous and foolish, but we need this. Draco catches my wrists and slams them above my head with his iron grasp. He slides his other hand down my body, brushing my breasts, my side, and then my thigh. I shift to make room for his hand so that he can rub his calloused digits against my desperate clit.

We're frantic to finish. My lower abdomen tingles and warms as he pulls in and out of me while fingering my pussy. It takes no time at all for me to reach my completion. An intense shot of heat and electricity runs through me. Then I wrap my body around his, biting his shoulder to stifle my scream.

Draco leans his forehead to mine as his hips stutter. He thrusts several more times, then spills into me in a silent flood of pleasure.

We hold each other, catching our breath, clutching onto one another like a lifeline. As he breathes heavily, I trace his features. I love this man. My fingers rub over his temple, the faded scar, his minuscule age lines — unnoticeable except to me. I know everything about him.

A shiver runs over my shoulders. The air begins to cool as I furrow my brows. Draco glares at me with a hint of darkness.

My stomach twists.

I trace his faded scar one more time. Tilting my head in confusion, I place my feet on the ground on shaky legs. Draco turns his back to me. He casts a cleansing charm on us as he tucks himself into his pants. He hasn't said anything yet.

As I pull my jeans on one leg at a time, the intense shaking sensation moves from my legs, up my chest, to my arms, and then my hands.

His broad shoulders fill out his robe. His hair looks slightly shorter. I reach for my wand, trembling with fear.

His features melt into the darkness as he inches around to face me. Draco senses my growing dread.

His shorter, clean-cut hair.

His age lines.

His *faded* scar.

"Hello, love." Draco's dark voice makes me stumble back in terror. "What gave me away?"

Chapter 25: Bargain

Chapter Summary

"The devil doesn't bargain
He'll only break your heart again
It isn't worth it, darling
He's never gonna change
He'll never be Prince Charming
He'll only do you harm again
I don't mean to meddle
But the devil doesn't settle
No, the devil doesn't bargain"
-The Devil Doesn't Bargain, Alec Benjamin

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning! This chapter contains DV.

The whole story is problematic and toxic, but some chapters are worse than others. If you've gotten this far then you know the drill by now, but be kind to yourselves.

Also, thank you all for your comments and kudos it makes me so happy to know that you're enjoying the piece, or are invested in the story! If you're loving it and want to help me reach more readers, I would be honored if you would share it with a friend.

But regardless, I want to offer my deep appreciation for you!



"What?" My voice trembles as I raise my wand to his chest, holding onto the wood with both hands. "H-How?"

I dart my eyes to the castle, calculating whether or not I can make it to Draco in time. But he catches me and smirks as if daring me to try. Shadows dance across the forest floor as I hold my arms high, unwilling to allow him the upper hand. *Shit!* Why is he here? Why now? How did he get here if we still have the time turner?

Rolling my head to ease the nagging itch, I groan in frustration. My former captor reduces me from the confident, brave witch I've become over the past year back into the vulnerable thing I used to be in 2004. Running into him in 1998 wasn't something I ever considered possible. Now, I'm kicking myself for the oversight.

"Why are you here!?" I spit.

The older, war-hardened Draco stands in line with my wand, unphased. His arrogance grates at my nerves. I want to hex him and run. But our bond hums. I notice how it draws me to him, now more intense than ever. I, of course, feel my bond with the younger Draco, but it's easy to become distracted from its constant pull because of my love for him. Our attraction feels right and good. Not to mention, we make love at a ridiculous rate. As I stare at the man before me, I am hyper-aware of the bond's drag toward him. Now that I realize who he really is, the bond feels unnatural. Powerful, yes, but misaligned, like using a wand that isn't your own. Our pull is tainted by mistrust.

Taking two steps backward, I stumble over a rock under my feet. This is dangerous. I need to get away.

But I'm also deadly curious.

What if he's not evil any longer? What if he remembers how in love we are...*were*? Is it possible that the future changed for the better? My shoulders drop a fraction as I ask in a small voice, "Draco?" Merlin, please let him remember our adoration for one another. *Please* let time have changed him. The wind floats through the trees, picking up dry leaves in its path and skating over my shoulders while I wait. "Are you still *you*?" The silence that follows is tight and heavy.

"Which *me*, sweetheart?" He raises a cocky eyebrow and brushes off his clothes. I can't stop to think about the fact that he just forced himself on me again. That bastard took advantage of my vulnerability. No, I have to believe that he is about to reveal the ultimate answer to me — whether or not anything I did made a difference. However, my sinking feeling begins to bloom. Deep down inside, I *know* that he wouldn't have fucked me like that if we are head-over-heels in love in the future. He would know I'd be terrified of him until he revealed the truth. My breath hitches in my throat as I hold on to my last vestiges of denial. Maybe...

He stares directly into my eyes. His stony gaze is full of disdain as he continues, "If you're asking if there is anything left of that besotted, naive boy," he says, pointing at the castle. "— then the answer is no." My stomach drops. All the blood rushes out of my body. "He died the moment you left me."

As if every sound around me quiets to nothing, I stand numb. I'm speechless — crushed.

My arms go limp as I'm overwhelmed with heartache. Nothing I did this past year made any difference. It didn't work. My vision narrows to pinpoints as my subconscious blocks out everything around me. Flashes of Draco bringing stacks of books to my room after I first arrived at the Manor hit me. He seemed so kind then, so solid and genuine. But it was all a lie. Even from my first memories, he was constructing the narrative he wanted. He told me he brought all the books that mentioned my symptoms, but now I'm sure he curated the stack. My cunning and calculated jailer used the lie as an excuse to get closer to me. And, with just a few sentences, he's now confirmed the unthinkable. He was aware throughout everything.

"You knew about our love the whole time?" I ask, tilting my head to the canopy, trying to stop my eyes from welling up. I won't do it. I refuse to cry in front of him.

"Of course I did."

Draco hasn't moved closer yet, but his power over me radiates off his shoulders. He knew. It feels like a sucker punch to my gut. He *knew!* When he repeatedly wiped my memory, he knew that, at one point, we were all that mattered to one another. He knew how much we sacrificed to be together and how hard it was to trust one another — how we clung to each other after our trust was won. Every single time he manipulated and harmed me, he remembered saying the words, *Now and forever, I bind my life to yours.*

Before now, I had two possibilities in my mind. Either, the older Draco started our fake love affair when I arrived on his doorstep, and he was a sick oppressor. Or, my actions would have altered the future so significantly that it would produce completely different outcomes. I refused to consider the fact that, at one point, our love was real but that he *still* treated me so poorly. How could this be true!? What happened to him!?

"But then, it doesn't make sense." I'm still shaking from shock. I feel empty as I take in this confirmation. I run my forearm under my eyes and let out a short, shaky sigh, trying to catch my breath. He said something about me leaving him. But I'm not!

"Sure it does Hermione. You're the brightest witch of our age. You can put it together."

The way that he's speaking in code again causes my skin to crawl. I'm devastated with grief. My real love and I spent the past week working out a plan to keep us together. I *always* wanted to stay in 1998. I'm here in the Forbidden Forest despite my desperate desire to end this war so that we can implement the plan that will *keep* me here. There shouldn't be any reason for Draco to give in to this evil. I promised I would stay with him. I swallowed the bitter pill, giving up any chance to end Voldemort because of my limited information and resources. I agreed not to return to 2004 to carve out some semblance of joy and happiness in this godforsaken world.

"No! It doesn't make sense! I'm *not* leaving him," I spit. "So you have no reason to treat me —" I drop my eyes to the forest floor as I feel the sting of angry tears. Stumbling over my words, I finish, "— how you've treated me."

He closes the distance between us in two quick steps, knocking my wand to the side and fisting the back of my hair. I rear back, trying to shake him off, but his hold causes me to feel weak.

When he speaks, our bond hammers with an angry intensity. I can smell his expensive cologne and feel his broad chest pressed against me. "Do you mean the way I treated you when I protected your clueless ass for years? Or maybe when I kept you safe and happy? — or when I took care of you each time you begged for my cock?" He snarls at me, breathing fire. "I did my part!" Outrage pulses within him. I've struck a nerve. Draco leans in and grasps my hair harder. "And you *did* leave me." Beneath his fury, a resonating thrum of hurt underpins every one of his words. "Do you think for one second I'll let you go through with this plan after disappearing from my life for *years*? Now, after all this time, do you think I'll let you do it *again*? I've waited for six *fucking* years. There is no way in hell I'm letting you run off to some secret escape in 1998, never to return!"

I can't stand it. I won't let him push me around again. Draco and I fought several times over the past year. He even scared me sometimes, but I learned that I have to hold my own.

I *have* to stand up to him. Even if I haven't changed the future yet, there is still time. He's pissed that I left him, but that is not happening. I would rather die than set him on this course.

"Get off me, you bastard!" I flail around, trying my best to pull free from his hold. I need to get away. I need to run and find my husband because I'll be safe if I can get to him. If I can tell him what is happening, he will understand. "You can't drag me back to 2004 with you! I won't do that!" I yell. "I can't leave him! I promised!"

The older Draco presses into my shoulder, then leans back and drawls as if my wishes mean nothing to him, "I'm not dragging anyone, Hermione. You're coming of your own free will."

This isn't happening!! He can't force me to do this! "*No!*" I cry.

I try to break free from his hold, but his grasp feels like a vice. I lift my wand again, but Draco anticipates the move. He grabs my wrist and pins it against the nearby tree, pressing his weight into me and forcing me to drop it.

"You're Imperiused!" I moan. That has to be the case. My Draco said it himself just a few days ago.

He growls, "Sorry, love," brushing off the suggestion, and there is no way to tell if he's telling the truth.

"You said you could never harm me!"

Draco's furious. "And, *your* hypocrisy is astounding."

My heart rate picks up as I begin to feel cornered. Wandless and desperate, I yell, "*Millie!*"

My mind races as I attempt to do anything I can to avoid this nightmare. Millie can help. She can get my Draco and warn him. He'll come to save me like he has so many times before.

I struggle as my elf friend appears, looking startled to be summoned back to the forest so quickly. When she sees us, her eyebrows lower in confusion. I watch as she dips into her magic, scrutinizing the situation to figure out what's going on. I push against Draco's hold on me, giving her time to work it out. Then, her ears droop backwards, realizing what's happening and who stands before her. I see it in her fearful expression. She senses it in the same way that she knew I was a Malfoy when I landed in 1997 — the way that she knew something was off when I looked upon my younger self for the first time at the Manor. She's tied to our family much like a marriage bond. She feels the small nuances of time and circumstance.

"Millie, please!" I beg. "Go get Dra—"

But before I can finish, the older Draco silences me. "Don't you dare, Millie. That's a direct order, do you hear me?" he demands. His voice is deep and harsh. His eyes are locked to mine while growling at her over his shoulders.

There's a long silence while she wrestles with herself, and then I hear her moan. "Yes, M-master." The words seem to force themselves out of her unwilling lips.

Draco's silver eyes smolder like liquid metal, roiling with the desire to scorch everything in their path. "Go to the Manor and ignore any other summons to the castle tonight."

Millie's expression mirrors my sorrow. "But, Sir," she squeaks, trying her best to intervene.

Draco is breathing fire, livid at my attempt to escape him. I thrash around, trying to break free, but his hold is like stone. "You are never to speak of this again, Millie. You may not *ever* tell him." With his irate order, I pause. My eyes narrow as I realize he plans to keep this interaction from his younger self. *Why?*

Millie whimpers. This poor elf has witnessed more of our tragic love affair than anyone else, including several versions of ourselves. She wrings her hands, trying to ignore him and throwing furtive glances toward the castle. But a direct order from her lifelong owner goes a long way, even if she is a free elf. My shoulders sag as I realize that she won't be able to help.

When she hesitates, Draco yells, "Go!"

Shaking, she reluctantly nods her head and vanishes. Then, Draco leans into me again, fuming.

"This dream to craft a new future is ridiculous." He drops the enchantment, giving me back my voice, then asks, "What did you think was going to happen, Hermione? Do you have any idea how time works?" His condescension causes my blood to boil. Of course, I don't! Because of *him*, I'm incredibly ignorant regarding time travel. And his younger self was, too, but I guess that's now changed. "Did you assume that after the battle, you two could leave, and then some alternate version of me would stay at the Manor to lock your obliviated younger self away?" My pulse pounds in my wrist as he presses it into the tree.

Suddenly, feeling my pain through the bond, Draco releases his pressure. I watch him take a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. He shakes his shoulders, collects himself, and then attempts to start again. He is trying to temper his actions. After a beat, he clears his throat, bringing my arm to his mouth to place a tender kiss on the soft underside of my wrist. Then he rasps, "I'm sorry." He lifts his softened eyes to mine. "Are you okay?"

Too bad for him; I'm not calm at all. I yank my arm from his hold and sneer, "I didn't know what would happen. All I knew was I didn't want to be with *you*!" It feels so good to cut him down. I could never do that before because I always felt so lost. Now, I have the bigger picture, though. My desperation and the incident with Millie remind me that I'm *not* weak. I was able to shake him. I'm stronger and more formidable than before.

My older husband steps back and drops his wand to his side. Then, he huffs a dark laugh, shaking his head. "Gods, there you are." He closes his eyes, savoring the moment. I watch in nervous anticipation as he drags another long breath of relief into his lungs and out again. Then he rubs his forehead, smiling at the ground. "Finally," he hums.

I cringe, remembering when he used to look past me as if searching for my former self. *I'm* now the woman he was looking for all along. He wasn't waiting for me to remember who I was. He was waiting for who I would become. Before, I was lost, scared, and docile. Now I'm war-hardened as well. *I'm* the witch he fell in love with.

Draco looks more resolute than before when he lifts his dark gaze. "Well right now, witch, I don't give a fuck what you want." A chill runs up my body as he cups my jaw, running his thumb over my cheek with careful devotion. "I've been threw with you making all the decisions for a long time. You don't get to pull the strings anymore." His tone is cold as he asserts, "After tonight you'll have done all you needed to do here. Before the sun rises you are coming home."

I sense Draco's anger, but there's something else crawling across our bond. It reminds me of the constant duality of emotions I felt from him the entire time we lived together in the future. It makes me feel as if I am once again in the darkness. I hate it. I hate him. I want to stay with my Draco, happy and in love.

"No! Why the hell would I do that?!" I attempt to shake him off again. The way he touches me without any consideration of my personal boundaries makes me seethe. He's acting like I'm his still, which couldn't be farther from the truth.

As I try to squirm out of his hold again, he states in his calm, icy tone, "Because I've finally done it."

I stop moving and stare at him. "What?" Then I hunch my shoulders and pull back, bracing myself. He's about to drop a bombshell on me, and I know I need to prepare. Through our frustratingly solid connection, I sense that the following words out of his mouth will change everything.

"I've secured everything we need."

I scowl as he speaks in shadowy code again. But, I don't have to worry for long because he makes himself exceedingly clear.

"I'm finally ready to kill the Dark Lord."

What!/? That's the last thing I expected him to say.

He points a finger in my face. "You're coming back to my goddammed bed." I rear back in response to his vitriol as he drops his arm, adding, "Then we're ending his reign." He offers another sardonic laugh. "— like you always said I would."

"What do you mean *everything we need*?" I demand, now completely lost. My body is still shaking with anxiety.

"All the weapons — the secrets and advantages that give us the upper hand." He pauses and glares at me to emphasize his point.

"Stop talking in riddles! What do you mean? What weapons? The Hallows!? Did you steal the wand?!"

"I mean everything," he growls. "—the Horcruxes, the Hallows, the potions."

I feel myself go weak in the knees. How could it be possible? I envision a world free from fear and torture, where witches and wizards can thrive — a world without war. I imagine being able to make that kind of difference. I ache to know what it would feel like to watch children eating ice cream at Florean Fortescue's. Or, how blessed it would be for wizarding society to finally breathe again.

Draco continues, "I'll kill him —" he knows how desperately I want a future without Voldemort. He knows I hate the evil dictator more than anyone. His tone is guarded as if ending Voldemort would only be for my benefit. "— but only if you come back." His threat causes my stomach to knot. "If you don't, the world can burn to the ground for all I care."

I feel the trees closing in as my plan to ride off into the sunset with *my* Draco begins to fade away. He's done it. This older Draco has manipulated the only future that could tempt me away from my love. If he is telling the truth, then I could save the wizarding world from unspeakable torment.

"Draco," I plead. "If you have everything then please, just go back to 2004 and kill him. You don't need me."

He clasps his hand around my jaw, holding me in place to kiss me, then coos, "Unfortunately for both of us I *do* need you."

I yank backward, sobbing. "No! You can't make me leave!" I feel my fear rise and wonder why my young husband hasn't come to save me yet. "You have to realize that if you force me to go, you're causing your own suffering!"

Draco runs his hand through his hair. "Maybe so, but I've now extensively researched the effects of time travel, and I know one thing." He leans in, wipes a tear off my cheek with his thumb, then kisses the corner of my eye. I'm stunned by this turn of events and only half-hearted in my attempt to shrug him off. "You were right. Time is fixed. There's no changing these events."

"No!" I cry again, sounding sick with grief. "I can't do that to him." My voice wavers. Then I have a thought. Hoping to pull at his heartstrings, I add, "—to *you*." In a last-ditch effort to force him to see reason, I plead. "Draco," I wrap my hands around his neck, hanging on his large frame to convince him. "— I promised you I'd never leave. I love you. Don't make me do this. *Please* don't do this to us." My last few words come out as a pathetic whine. I run my hands over his cheek, then raise to kiss his jaw — trying to elicit a fraction of our attachment. But, even before I lower back to the ground, I sense his hardened heart. He knows I'm trying too hard.

"You've already left me." Draco places another kiss on my frozen lips. This time, I don't try to stop him; I'm in such a state of shock. "I'll see you at home, sweetheart."

Chapter 26: The Accident (Part One)

Chapter Summary

"I walk a lonely road
The only one that I have ever known
Don't know where it goes
But it's home to me, and I walk alone"
-Boulevard of Broken Dreams, Roses and Revolutions

Chapter Notes

Okay lovely readers, here's the deal. It took me a few weeks to write this chapter because it is so important it ended up being 10,000 words!! So here is what I'm going to do. I'm going to release it in three parts and post a new part every other day until they are all out.

I love your comments so keep them up, please! Your support means the world to me!

My knees hit the forest floor as Draco pulls a golden top out of his pocket, taps it, and vanishes.

Sticks poke my legs through my jeans, and branches hang in my face, but I don't care. I clutch at my chest, trying to breathe. My worst nightmare has come true. I have to go back to 2004, to Draco's cold embrace, all while knowing that he remembers our love and is *still* choosing to treat me so harshly.

And I have to break the younger Draco's heart.

Maybe I shouldn't trust what Draco from the future just told me!

I try to find a loophole that will allow me to stay. My older husband said that he'll end Voldemort if I come back. But what if—if—I risk it? If I refuse to leave and Draco punishes

me by never killing Voldemort, is it really so bad? Voldemort already rules in the future; maybe that's just as fixed as the rest of time.

I gasp for air, but nothing happens.

I can't breathe!

This is too much. I can't do this. I *can't*!

But I also can't leave the wizarding community to suffer. I might have the power to end that torture.

I scan the forest with unfocused eyes, lost. The trees around me feel alive, but I'm hollow and alone. I have to go back. The fate of the wizarding world literally depends on me.

I smash the palm of my hand against my forehead to exorcise my demons. Why?? *Why!*?

Why have I let him corner me yet again?!?

Frustrated, I thread together my fingers behind my neck, hang my head, and growl at the unfair universe.

Wait, what did he say?

I can't roll over and let Draco's evil twin continue to dictate my every move. Maybe I can still do something to set things right. I scrunch my eyes and try to remember everything, but my mind feels fuzzy from the shock of seeing him again.

The older Draco said that he had everything — all the tools. He specifically mentioned the Hallows, Horcruxes, and something else. What was it?

Tapping my foot, I try my best to recall. Come on, come on!

Potions!

As soon as I remember, I hunch low in confusion, tucking my body inward on myself.

He must somehow have the unbeatable wand in 2004. And he might have found all the Horcruxes. But *potions*? When have we ever needed a potion to bring Voldemort down? What role do potions play?

The only potion I remember us discussing was a restorative draught. But that can't be used to harm.

He also said time is fixed, which means that before leaving, my younger self or I need to give Voldemort some kind of information. However, I have no idea what the message could be. I ball my hands into fists, clutching some of the wet earth.

Potions, restorative draught, information that would end the war for Voldemort.

Why would I ever do that!?

Remus told me that my intel was the reason so many of my friends died. No one from the Order was ever seen again after the battle.

I chant the essential bits of information, attempting to draw some sort of meaning from them.

Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...

"You're the brightest witch of our age, Hermione. You'll figure it out."

Visions of breadcrumbs laid out for me by several sources over the past year begin to emerge. They claw their way out of the recesses of my mind, demanding my attention.

Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...

"Stewed Mandrakes?"

"They're the main component in Mandrake Restorative Draught. It's a complex healing potion that I thought we could brew together."

Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...

"Your memories hold the key to melting the stone."

Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...

"Nymphadora was one of them. In fact, I'm the only one left. I never found their bodies though so I have hope."

Information begins to fall into place like flipping over puzzle pieces to reveal their designs. They are still a jumbled mass, but I'm starting to make order from the chaos. My mind feels sluggish; however, with each newly resurfaced memory, those pieces form the larger picture. There's something here. I just have to find it. My heart rate picks up as I start to see things coming together.

Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...Restorative draught, potions, intel, the death of Order members...

"He came back from a recent trip with a new wand, and is now acting almost giddy with power. He had already recently sanctioned the slavery and branding of Muggleborn witches—." Draco clears his throat. "Anyways, now he also Tabooed his name, and even started petrifying those who oppose him."

Holy shit!

I rise and stare into the inky blackness of the night with wide eyes.

Realization slams into me. It's as if all the remaining puzzle pieces finally click into place. I see the completed image. I know what happens tonight!!

I'm not just returning to 2004 to kill Voldemort.

I'm saving them *all!!*

What was it that Draco once called me? A Warrior? Sweet Salazar! I finally get it, but the truth is a terrible responsibility. I can do it. I can save every last one of them, but there's no escaping the fact that I must leave.

I have no memory of Harry Potter, Ron Wesley, and the rest of the Order, but they played meaningful roles in my life. My younger self would want me to do everything I could to protect them. I've seen glimpses of them in this time period and the next, but by the time I left in 2004, they were all gone, and their ghosts still haunt me.

I feel connected to them—not in the same way that I do with Draco, but in a shared history and a common goal—the love of friendship. The idea that I might be able to bring people back from the dead and set things right is breathtaking. Maybe they're *not* dead! Maybe

they're *petrified*! I imagine what it would be like for them to emerge from their frozen state and re-enter wizarding society, healthy and whole.

They could be free to lead happy lives. I could even meet them all. I could have friends and family again.

I sink lower with the weight of my longing. I could save them. But I have to put the pieces in place now so there's still a chance when I return to 2004.

They could all grow old and finally rest after years of fighting. A vision of weekly dinners together flashes before my eyes. We could sit and share stories. I could cook for them. Maybe they would still like me even though I've become someone new. *Maybe*.

Just as a nagging vision of the future Draco keeping me from the dinner party creeps in, yelling and loud crashes draw my eyes to the castle where the battle is starting. This is what it has all been leading up to. This is what I intended. I don't know what will happen to me if I go back, but I know that I can significantly impact the Orders' lives. I'm sacrificing myself again to save those around me. I have to! I take a deep breath, accepting that my new realizations have sealed my fate.

I have to leave Draco. I have to hurt him to set him on the course of evil. It's unfair and devastating.

But I'm a warrior.

When my younger husband finally walks through the forest hours later, I'm as ready as possible. I've compartmentalized the implications of my intended actions in a tiny, dark corner of my mind so that I can do what needs to be done.

I'm saving the Order. That's something I can do with my horrible life and circumstances.

Maybe I was never meant to enjoy the love that Draco and I created. Perhaps it was only a tool used by fate to help set the future right. If that's the case, then this will all be worth it. Anyway, the only person I'm really hurting is myself...

..

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...and Draco.

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Suddenly, I can't breathe again.

Moments pass of heartbreaking sadness, and then I scratch at the base of my skull and shake my head to ignore the grief that just crept out of the dark corner. Instead, I focus on what tonight will do for Remus, Harry, Ron, all wizarding children, families, and more.

Draco's aggressive figure steps into view, arriving in front of me. His hair hangs in his eyes, and his muscles pulse with adrenaline from fighting for hours. He's breathing heavily, wearing his Death Eater robes. Anyone else running into him tonight must have been terrified because he looks dangerous. But then his shoulders drop when he sees me.

"Come here!" He hoists me into the air and crushes me into his body, but I remain stiff. I'm numb. I have to be.

He smells like smoke again. I worry about what that means. However, his hold is warm when he asks, "Are you okay? I felt your fear. What happened?" He kisses me and runs his palm over my hair, flattening my curls. "Fuck, I tried to get to you. I'm sorry." Frustrated, he places his forehead on mine and closes his eyes. "The battle is a nightmare. This is the first I could get away."

"It's okay; nothing happened," I intone.

Right, nothing happened.

I pull back, rubbing my hands over my arms. "I just got spooked by a Ghoul. I had to fight it off, but I'm fine."

Draco pulls back to examine my features and narrows his eyes so I steady myself. I have to control my emotions, or he'll catch on.

"Are *you* okay?" I ask to distract him.

Shaking off his suspicion, he pulls me back for a deeper embrace, burying his face in my neck and then groaning, "This night can't end fast enough as far as I'm concerned." As he holds me, I feel the tension eeking from his muscular frame. "Witch, I can't believe I permitted you to come. I must be out of my mind." He continues to run his hands over my locks, taking comfort in our embrace. Then our pull toward one another electrifies as Draco hums, "Merlin, I've missed you. It's torture when we're apart." He kisses me again, growling through his arousal and irritation.

My stomach ties in knots when I lean back and stare into his weary eyes. This is the man I want to preserve forever. This man, my vulnerable and caring husband — not the puffed-up Death Eater who feels his only option is to throw his weight around. And, certainly, not the calculated, toxic man he becomes. I wipe away a tear, then run my hands along his temple, resting my palm on his strong jaw and kissing him again. When our lips touch, a fire smolders within our cores.

"Thank you," I say into his lips. "I know you didn't want me to be here. But Draco, I had to be!"

That statement is now more accurate than I ever knew.

There's a shift in Draco's expression as he pauses and sets his hand to his chest, checking in with the bond. The move causes me to still, worrying that he already senses my deceit. He stares at me in confusion, then drops his eyes to the space between us and back up again. I hold my breath and wait, unsure what he feels. But after a beat, he shakes his head, placing me on the ground and threading our fingers together. "I know. Let's just get this over with."

With our reunion settled, Draco is now on edge and ready to move. It makes me realize that he's alone. We're missing one vital person.

"Where is she?"

Draco scowls. "She's coming. I told her to meet us here." When I give him a skeptical look, he adds, "I mentioned you were here and needed to speak with her. She didn't want to listen at first, but she's on her way."

Okay, that sounds promising. I wring my hands together, anxious to ensure everything works as I envisioned.

"And you told her she needs to be alone?"

"Of course," he sighs.

Just then, twigs crack, startling us as Harry Potter shuffles into view. With his quick reflexes, Draco grabs me to his side, Disillusioning us.

Voldemort called out to Harry about an hour ago, challenging him to arrive in the forest and meet face to face, but I'm still shocked. My chest puffs with pride at the confirmation that my former best friend was incredibly brave. Watching him walk to his potential death causes my heart to ache.

He steps over twigs and rocks, looking as though he is talking to himself — crying. Draco and I stand in silent observation, neither of us knowing what to do next. While we pause, my palms itch. For my plan to work, Harry can't sacrifice himself.

The forest is dark, but I can make out Harry wiping his eyes and dropping a small black object onto the ground next to him.

"Draco, stay here," I blurt out, pulling in a tight breath and lunging forward.

His eyebrows rise as he steps in front of me, blocking my path and grabbing my wrist.

"What?"

"Please," I beg, "I'll be right back."

"Not a chance, Hermione. What's going on?"

"I don't have time to explain. I need to stop him. He can't sacrifice himself yet!"

"What the hell does that have to do with our plan?" Draco sneers as his eyes darken.

I try to yank my arm away from his hold as I shoot back, "I'll tell you afterwards! I just need to —,"

However, before I finish my sentence, Draco scowls and shakes his head. "Stay put!" he orders, storming off towards Potter. "Honestly, I'd be happy to stun the prat."

Trusting him to help me, I smile. The air on the castle grounds feels charged as battles are fought, Voldemort stalks in the forest's darkness, and I attempt to connect all the dots that fate

left in my path. The intense fighting has caused everyone's stress level to max out, which is helpful because it doesn't give Draco enough time to get too suspicious. He's trying to keep me happy long enough to wipe my younger self's mind so we can run.

When he's a few steps away, I slink over to Harry's path and kick around some leaves, looking for the object. The emergence of Harry Potter put in motion two things. First, we need to stop him, and second, I need to investigate what he left behind. However, I have a pretty good idea what it is after watching him chatting with what seemed like nobody. My heart hammers as I hear Draco call out to Harry. Then, something hard rolls under my shoe. I bend to pick it up and find that my suspicions were correct. Harry dropped the Resurrection Stone.

Events now seem to play out in front of me as if I could orchestrate time itself. To arrive at Order Headquarters in the future, I need to give this rock to Firenze. But, then, it would be impossible for Draco to have it in the future, and he said he had the Hallows. That must have been one of the reasons he insisted that I return. I have two of the Hallows.

Rather than leave anything to chance, I charge the new stone as a portkey and pull out Remus' beaded satchel, dropping it in for safekeeping. I'll need to get one to Firenze and hang on to the other. I'm not going back to 2004 only to discover that I should have brought the stone.

Behind me, there's a thud as Harry falls to the ground, and then Draco stomps back to meet me again, furious. As he moves, he cancels our Disillusionment and instead casts the cloaking spell on Harry.

"Alright, Hermione, what the hell is going on?"

I swallow my apprehension and begin the plan to destroy him. The minute I chose this path, I felt the sharp edge of the knife I would need to drive into Draco's heart.

It pierced mine as well.

"I want to try my best to save as many people as I can before we leave."

Draco's jaw is set, but he remains silent while waiting for me to continue.

"I've realized what the intel is that needs to be offered up."

Draco shifts his weight. "You can't save them." His voice is just above a whisper because he knows this news won't go well with me. "The Dark Lord plans to decimate the entire Order." He pauses to take a deep breath. "I'm sorry, love, but it's useless."

I grab his hand, cupping it between both of mine. "No, I know that! Of course that monster wants to kill them all. That's why I need to convince him to petrify everyone instead!"

"I'm sorry, I must have heard you wrong." The air cracks between us as Draco freezes. His voice is quiet and scary. "*You* aren't getting anywhere near the Dark Lord."

"Fine, the other Hermione will then. We've got to get her to the clearing anyway," I say, shrugging him off. That way, there's a chance that someone could revive them in the future." My stomach twists again. There would be a chance that they wouldn't be gone for good."

Draco crosses his arms, fisting his wand harder while taking in what I said. "Hermione—," he cautions. "That's a stretch, and petrifying them would be a fate *worse* than death." He runs his hands through his hair and then pushes his sleeves up, one after the other, revealing his Dark Mark. "I'm not putting us in unnecessary danger. I want to stun your younger self and get out of here." He lowers his voice and adds, "I've also realized something." His tone brightens as if he is about to attempt to convince me of something. "I guess we've both had a lot of time to think over the past week."

I have no idea what to expect as Draco continues, so I hold my breath.

He fists his wand, then bemoans his unfair circumstances, "There's nowhere that we can escape that would be safe because of my bloody Dark Mark. He can track me anywhere with this, and if I run, he won't hesitate to murder me."

Surprisingly, I never considered that detail while pouring over notes last week.

Draco continues, "I can't have him hunting us down. You'd be in too much danger."

I roll my eyes. Of course, Draco would be worried about *me* if Voldemort wanted to kill him. My idiot husband never stops worrying about those precious few that he loves. I'm so caught up in his surprise and ridiculousness that I almost miss his next comment.

"We need to hide in *time*."

My thoughts screech to a halt. I hear the rustling of creatures in the dark and the wind rushing in and out of the trees as if the forest was breathing. My ears ring, and my head swims. The thought of us fleeing to another *time* is so tempting it hurts. I can't take the time to process his plan. I'm on a mission. But that was how tonight was supposed to end up. We were supposed to flee to somewhere safe. We could be arm in arm, strolling down the streets of Paris in 1965 by tomorrow if everything hadn't imploded. I shuffle my feet and rub the back of my neck, considering again if I should just disappear with him, future-be-damned, but then I remember Harry Potter's prone body on the forest floor and cringe.

"Okay," I stutter, "T— that makes sense, but let's just do this first. If we make sure he petrifies them then there would still be hope," I reason, grabbing onto his forearm. "Draco, I can't think of any other intel that I would offer up, and at least they wouldn't be d-dead."

He rubs his forehead, looking thrown. "He'd never do that with Potter. The rest of the Order *maybe*, but he believes that Potter needs to die for his reign to truly take hold."

"That's because he doesn't know something that I do." Draco pauses with his hand on his head, but his eyes shoot to mine as they darken. "Harry holds a piece of Voldemort's soul within him." I need Draco to agree to help me. I can't leave 1998 without ensuring that the Order is safe and that the crucial moments happen. "We just need my younger self and then she can —"

I feel the frustration run through his body as a voice behind me says, "I can what?"

Chapter 27: The Accident (Part Two)

Chapter Summary

"However far away, I will always love you
However long I stay, I will always love you
Whatever words I say, I will always love you
I will always love you"
-Love Song, 311

Turning, I see her. Hermione is covered in dirt, and her hair is wet. She looks like she barely made it out of the battle alive. Then, not waiting for Draco's approval of my plan, I run to her.

"You can help us!" I hold the younger Hermione's hands in mine, praying for her to understand. "There's a way to save them all!" I watch her melt at the confirmation that she has the power to end the fighting. "I didn't have time to tell you at Malfoy Manor but *you* stop him from killing Harry when you reveal that Harry's a Horcrux!"

Her eyes brighten at that statement. She grabs my shoulders as tears track down her cheeks. Relief and hope flood her. Her curls fall in front of her face as she cries, "And that helps to end the war?!"

As soon as she says those words, I feel Draco's anger grow behind me. It carries through the bond as he listens to me craft another story.

Hermione's eyes are wide. "That's what you wanted to tell me? Thank the gods!" She throws her arms around my neck, and I breathe in her scent — it's sweet — vanilla maybe? Closing my eyes, I savor the tender moment of connection. This is one of only two instances in all timelines that we will be united as one — together, we remember everything. Her embrace causes me to take a deep breath as I grieve our fractured story.

I can't stop to think about what I'm going to do to her. Instead, I hug her as tight as possible.

I'm so, so sorry!

I wipe my eyes and try my best to reassure her with an even tighter hold.

However, when I open my watery eyes again, I catch sight of Draco, scowling and irritated. He doesn't like this added layer of complication. He wanted to wipe her memories as soon as she met us so we could leave.

"Hermione—," he warns.

We both turn.

I stare him down, pleading with him to play along as my younger self looks confused. Then, Draco marches forward and fists my upper arm. He pulls me to the side, throwing out a finger for Hermione to *give us a minute*, then casts a Muffliato.

"No!" he snarls. We're getting this over with and leaving! If you want to be the one to wipe her mind, fine. But do it, or I will." Draco senses that something is off, and he doesn't want everything to fall apart. I can see it in his gaze. He's anxious as the ground beneath him begins to shake.

"Draco," I urge him to listen. "We *have* to put in place the parts of history that lead to us being together."

He narrows his eyes, fuming, so I place my palm on his jaw.

I beg him to understand. "I don't want to run the risk of messing with time where our love is concerned. She needs to go offer some sort of intel that's so big it ends the war. That's the only reason I arrive at the Manor in the future. *Please*, let's just do what we can to set as much right as possible before we run!"

"What's going on!?" Hermione demands, allowing me to extinguish the silencing charm and continue my precarious plan. As I walk back to meet her, she stares at Draco, then scowls and darts her eyes back to mine.

"How do the two of you know each other?"

My younger self is too intelligent for her own good. So I grab her hand and pull her with me, walking deeper into the forest as I admit, "You're not going to believe this, but we're married in the future."

Suddenly, she stops in her tracks, looking disgusted.

"*What!? — to Malfoy!?*" Her shock is comical. She's more thrown off by that information than the idea that she's about to face down Voldemort. Throwing a look of disgust at me, she starts moving again, mumbling to herself.

"Well, that's the first thing I'm going to put right after we win the war!" Then, turning again to face me, she asks, "*Really?* Not Ron?"

The fact that I must have had feelings for Ronald Weasley is new to me. And, if the battle wasn't raging around us, and I wasn't trying to direct time, I might have more energy for dissecting that tidbit. But, instead, everything is dire and devastating. Therefore, I ignore that new information, and in my body's effort to find a release of the tension, I start to laugh. I need to find humor where I can in this goddamn awful situation.

While I roll my lips and tuck my head to the side to hold in my bubbling laughter, Draco follows behind us, letting out an aggravated sigh.

"Well, he's actually very sweet," I say, glancing over my shoulder to smile at his stern expression.

Draco frowns, but when he catches my gaze, his eyes soften.

"That's vile," Hermione murmurs next to me.

"You're no peach either, Granger," he grumps.

I keep walking while eyeing him. Draco scans our surroundings with his wand held firm in his grasp. He's on edge, but I can feel his exasperated love for me. Then he raises his gaze again to mine.

At that moment, the world stops spinning.

Heat spikes between us, and I experience a gut-wrenching sense of longing. It feels like time's hands have wrapped their fists around my heart, forcing me to go against everything I hold dear. I haven't met these people that leaving Draco will save. The only true happiness I've ever felt has been in his arms. Draco cocks his head, sensing my visceral outpouring of love for him through the bond. Then he offers a wan smile.

Time's cruel hand keeps me moving forward. Nothing but a conclusion this massive in scale could keep me on my course.

I close my eyes for a moment, reminding myself: This is going to end Voldemort, this is going to save everyone. *I have* to do this.

We walk for five more minutes in silence before Draco stops.

"Hermione,"

Again, we both turn.

His mouth pulls to one side as he drawls, "*Malfoy*," scowling at her. His arrogance is thick and heavy as my younger self bristles beside me.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Come here." He steps forward. "Do you hear that in the woods?"

I stop moving and listen for potential threats before Draco adds, "Centaur. Look, over there." He points to our left in the darkness, and I squint my eyes. Before I spot them, I stare back at Draco in confusion. So he explains himself further. "If you want to follow time as closely as you say, come on. He drags me away, motioning for my younger self to stay put again. Then we step out of her earshot before Draco calls, "Firenze!"

I can't believe I forgot! Draco saw my memories!

Just then, a tall, magnificent centaur clomps into view from the shadows. He looks like I remember, which causes my heart to cheer. I so rarely get to rely on my recollection. Realization washes over me as I shift to retrieve the stones in my bag. I forgot that when I left him my memories, Draco saw my interaction with the Centaur, which means he also learned about the Hallows and Horcruxes. I scan his features, wondering how much he put together.

"You shouldn't be here, girl," Firenze warns, casting his cautious gaze over Draco.

I steady my nerves and then pull upon my courage, asserting, "But you've read the stars and know what happens tonight. You know why."

He shuffles his hooves against the dirt, and his tail swishes as he says, "Not *what* happens, no. But that it happens, yes."

Choosing one, I pull out a stone and raise my arm to him. From closer, he looks enormous. "There isn't much time. Please, the next time I come to you, give this back to me." I stand on my tiptoes to offer the Hallow to him. He doesn't take it yet. "Keep it safe for me. It's important."

"We do not interfere in wizard wars."

"This isn't about tonight! I think you know that." I tilt my head to see if I'm right, and he rewards me with a slight nod of his majestic brow. "It will be many years, but when you see me next, will you give this to me?"

Reluctantly, he bends to hold out his hand, so I tip the stone into his grasp. While he studies it, I explain the rest. "I won't remember who I am." My voice cracks as I grieve what's to come. "I — I'll be very scared and lost, but your presence will be such a welcome relief. I point to the rock, adding, "It's a portkey. It will get me to my next destination — to safety. That's all."

Something shifts in the air as Draco bristles. "Hermione, we need to go."

Firenze's lip curls. Leaning down and lowering his voice, he asks, "Are you safe *now*, time traveler?" The sight of an Order member and a Death Eater walking through the forest together must be alarming. He keeps his eyes trained on Draco and looks like he is about to summon help, but I stop him.

"Yes, trust me. He won't hurt me."

"Hermione! " Draco is getting anxious. Something must be causing his nerves to be on edge. It likely has something to do with a circling crowd of Centaurs just out of sight.

"Will you help me?" I ask one last time.

There's a long pause as Firenze inspects the stone again. As he does, I hear soft clomping noises behind us. Draco is ready to grab my arm and run. But then Firenze holds up his hand and wards off the coming threat.

"I will, Ms. Granger."

"Thank you."

I follow in Draco's wake as we trek back towards the path. He's clutching my hand and leading the way, determined to get through this night as quickly as possible.

"Draco, thank you." My voice is barely above a whisper when I rub at the back of my neck. He turns, scanning the trees, then tilts his head, taking in my appearance. "I know you don't want to be doing all this but it means a lot to me."

It does. It's a relief that he hasn't put up a fight about escorting Hermione to Voldemort before we wipe her mind. I know his anxiety is clawing at him, but he must still be so relieved that I handed over the time-turner that he's willing to do what he can to make me happy. The thought causes my heart to break.

I don't want to do this. I don't want to abandon the love of my life and force him to survive — alone! — in Voldemort's post-war nightmare. My lies continue to pile up even after I swore to him that I was done hiding things. My breath stutters with my shame. I promised that I would be honest with him from here on out and that we would work through life's challenges together. My skin itches, and an oppressive weight drapes across my shoulders as I continue my plan. There is so little time left for us.

"Hey, are you okay?" He asks, threading his hand into my hair and running his thumb over my cheek.

"Yeah," I sniffle. "It's just a lot to hold. This night is so critical to my journey, our introduction, everything. I want to do what I can to set everything the way it needs to be."

He bends to kiss me, and his touch makes me want to melt into a pool of nothingness at his feet. I feel like shit. This man is trusting me to take care of his fragile heart. He desperately wants to believe that we can change the future into what we want. He's clueless about the tragedy unfolding. I wish there were something, anything, that I could do to ease the pain I am about to cause him.

The air stills as I grab his hand and place it on my heart, imploring him to listen. "Draco, I love you more than life itself." My voice cracks as I speak. I'm trying to get out everything I need to convey. I need to say enough to help him carry a fraction of our love with him after I'm gone. "You mean the world to me. I need you to know that."

He pulls back to scour my expression. "I love you too, Hermione." He squints and tilts his head. "It's going to be okay. We're almost there." Then he pulls me in for another hug, adding, "I admire your desire to save your friends, even if it's foolish. Would I rather be a hundred kilometers from here already? Of course. But, if this is what you need to feel like you've done everything you can, then I get that. I'll help you." He tucks my head to his shoulder and kisses my forehead. "You've been through so much. It's the least I can do."

"What the hell is going on!?" We crest a hill to find young Hermione resting her hand on her popped hip.

As I watch Draco turn and head back to our path, I'm overcome with everything that's happening. It all seems like it's going by so fast. I'm racing towards the moment that I need to betray him. I experience an intense need to grab him, tuck myself into his arms, and stop time. I want to spend the rest of my life in his strong embrace.

I stutter, trying to find a way to respond to my frustrated younger self, but Draco beats me to it.

"Look, Granger. There's stuff that you *can't* know." His deep voice sounds convincing as he uses my words from many months ago. "It has to do with a key action you take in the future. You have to remain unaware." He pulls me forward as I struggle with how to react. "Come on, let's get moving," he barks.

Brushing my hair out of my face, I catch Hermione's eyes as they land on my new scar. As she takes in its sight, her expression falls, remembering how much I already saved her from.

"Okay," she concedes, then falls in line behind us. Her trust in me is humbling. It's innocent and sad. She can't imagine a world where I would be about to harm her.

Also, I hate that Draco just used my way of lying to get the result he wanted. It's as if I've created a monster. A chill runs over my shoulders as I narrow my eyes at him, trying to reconcile him with his future self. Then I let out a relieved sigh because I still can't quite see it. However, my heart aches, realizing there is so little time left for these two figures in my life to have separate identities. My actions are about to thrust him into becoming the villain I know him to be in the future.

I grab his hand and squeeze his fingers, trying to hold onto him a little longer.

As if marching towards my reckoning, we continue to the clearing where Voldemort and his supporters wait. About ten minutes later, Draco slows his stride, and I hear people speaking up ahead. Their words don't carry, but the tenor of their voices does.

"We're here," he confirms, pushing me behind his back. He pauses for a second to make sure no one hears us coming and then asks, "Alright, love, what next?"

Behind us, Hermione groans. She's still irritated by our relationship and doesn't like hearing Draco call me 'love.'

Whelp, sweetheart, get used to it. This is your future.

When Draco hears her dissatisfaction again, he closes his eyes and hisses without turning to face her. "Give it a rest, Granger!"

Tensions are rising between them, and we don't have time for petty arguments, so I jump in. "Hermione, you have to go with Draco and reveal that Harry's a Horcrux," I order and then wait for her to nod her understanding. "However, remind him that Horcruxes are nearly impossible to destroy and get him to believe that if he tries, he'll die because it will kill off a part of his soul."

"Okay," she says slowly, considering my advice. "That's good. Yes, he'll be afraid to end Harry if he thinks it might harm him as well." She glances through the trees, looking like she's itching to hurry up and end this war. Without turning back to me she asks, "Then what?"

"Then Draco will take it from there. You can trust him."

She whips around to glare at Draco, taking in his tall stature and scowling. "What are you going to do? How does this all work?"

"That's the part you can't know," he drawls.

There is a long beat of silence as we all take in the plan, and then Hermione asks me, "You promise this works, and we end it tonight?"

"Yes," Draco and I say in tandem.

She waits for another breath and then offers, "The last I knew, there were still three Horcruxes left. Harry, of course, but also Nagini and the Diadem. The Sword of Gryffindor and Basilisk venom can destroy them." She doesn't know our plan, but she knows those objects need to be destroyed for any of this to work.

"The Diadem is gone," Draco confirms out of nowhere.

Hermione turns toward him, shocked to realize he knows about the Horcruxes. We haven't discussed the evil objects yet, but I know he saw my memory of learning about them. I can't decide if I'm relieved or frustrated. He had all the same information as I did, but he had no interest in trying to save anyone other than me.

Draco shrugs, "Potter threw it into the Room of Requirement and ignited it with Fiend Fire."

As if this is an entirely normal sentence, Hermione nods again. "Yeah, Fiend Fire works too, but it's so dangerous."

She cracks a small smile when Draco swipes his hand in the air, indicating his appearance, and offers a *well-duh* expression.

I suddenly realize that *that* must be why Draco smells like smoke. The thought makes me shake with anxiety over what could've happened tonight. Draco could've easily died in the castle. I knew he wouldn't because I now understand that time is fixed, but still, I don't like thinking of him in danger.

I clear my throat, then add, "Draco will walk you in and act like he found you in the woods."

"Okay, let's go," she says, trusting my account.

"Just a second, Granger."

Draco turns to face me, wrapping me into his arms and taking my breath away with a scorching kiss. I hear Hermione cluck her tongue behind me but couldn't care less.

Everything I'm doing is devastating torture. I try to hold back tears, knowing this is our goodbye. We will never again experience this type of pure love for one another.

Merlin, help me. I don't think I can do what I need to do. This is too much. His embrace feels warm and comforting, and his love is untainted.

I'm sorry, Draco. Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

As we attempt to fuse together and ward off the evil that surrounds us, I damn the gods for their cruelty but keep moving. I run my fingers over his arms, around his torso to his back. Then, I weave my hand into his robe, trying to distract him with my waiting lips as I inch the time-turner from his pocket.

It works; he's so concerned with reassuring me of his love and adoration that he doesn't notice the shift in weight. We lean into one another as tears fall down my face in earnest.

"I'll bring her right back, and then we can run. Okay?" Draco soothes, scrutinizing my features.

"Okay," I moan.

"Stay hidden!" He demands, pulling my chin up with a finger. I agree, then Draco narrows his eyes one last time. He places his hand on his chest again and stares at it, agitated.

I sense that he's about to check in with the bond again because his shoulders tense, and he looks suspicious. So, to avoid him catching on, I add, "I'll be fine, just be careful, okay?" Then I raise to my tip toes to bring my lips to his one last time. It's chaste because I don't dare linger. If I do, he'll know. But I ache to spend an eternity sealing my goodbye with the touch of our lips.

"Come on, Granger, let's go," Draco barks before grabbing her upper arm to drag her in front of his Master. I rub tears out of my eyes as I watch them round a corner, out of sight.

Then I slide the Invisibility cloak out of my bag.

Draco never would've agreed to bring me here if he thought I would face down Voldemort myself. He *had* to believe that he would drag my younger self into the clearing.

But that's too much of a risk.

I wrap the shimmering cloak around my shoulders and over my head to hide from view. I'm not leaving anything to chance, and I don't trust Hermione to get it all right. So, once I vanish, I cast a spell on my feet to muffle their sound.

Then I run to catch up.

Chapter 28: The Accident (Part Three)

Chapter Summary

"Goodbye, my almost lover
Goodbye, my hopeless dream
I'm trying not to think about you
Can't you just let me be?
So long, my luckless romance
My back is turned on you
Should have known you'd bring me heartache
Almost lovers always do"
- Almost Lover, A Fine Frenzy

I see them ahead of me on the path. Draco is dragging Hermione along, looking convincing as her assailant. However, I shoot a stunning spell at her back just before he shoves her into the nest of waiting Death Eaters.

Confused, Draco whips around when he feels her drop. His eyes are on Hermione as I race to replace her and sacrifice myself to Voldemort. As I run past him, I watch his hair move in response to the air I've displaced. Then, he creeps around to follow the disturbance with terror etched across his face. At that moment, he knows, but he hasn't let himself believe it yet.

I shut out all thoughts so that I can do what I must. There's no turning back now.

When Draco watches the cloak fall from my shoulders, he seethes. I shove the shimmering cloth back into my bag as he shoots into action, cuffing my arm a millisecond too late.

"Voldemort!" I yell, drawing everyone's attention.

Draco's rage causes my bones to ache. He's powerless to stop this incoming trainwreck now, and it thrusts him into several emotions at once. He's horror-stricken, livid, and vindicated all at the same time — he was suspicious of me all night. The chaos he experiences clashes and

rips inside of us. In response, he squeezes my arm even harder, but I yank free from his hold and step into the shadowy light of the clearing.

"Potter's Mudblood?" Voldemort hisses, looking up. Behind him, there's a huge, hairy, unconscious man tied to a tree and Death Eaters milling around chatting.

My heart races, and ears ring, but I can't stop. I chose my fate, and I need to see this through now.

I'm sorry, Draco! I'm sorry!

I try to comfort him through the bond, but it's pointless.

Voldemort shifts his eyes to my husband in confusion, "Draco? What have you brought me?" A manic joy pulls at his grotesque features.

I turn and catch Draco pulsing with anger. There's a drawn-out silence as he wars with himself about how to proceed. He doesn't want to participate in my plan now, and he's trying to formulate an escape, but there isn't one.

"I found her, Lord — running through the forest," he eventually chokes out, piercing me with his burning eyes.

The sycophantic followers all shake excitedly, leaning in to watch the show. They assume I represent a turning point that's about to occur, and they aren't wrong.

"Get off me, you Bastard!" I yell, playing my part. "You didn't find me. I was coming here anyways!"

Those gathered holler and sneer. But Voldemort stands, readying himself to strike.

"And why's that?" He laughs.

"You're going to call off the battle," I demand, my feet planted and my chin raised.

Voldemort stalks toward me, fuming, "Who are you to give me orders, you pathetic little bitch!?" He raises his wand, aiming his anger at me while his followers cheer. Sensing the oncoming danger, I tilt my head away and close my eyes, bracing myself.

"Cru—"

"My Lord, *wait!* "

Draco's heart rate is crashing so fast against his rib cage that It makes me jumpy.

"She said that she had important intel!" He looks wild and anxious, but only to my knowing inspection. Draco's voice only just betrays him. "I didn't have time to interrogate her before we arrived, but I can! Just give me a second, I'll bring her right back."

"What intel??"

Voldemort stands with his wand held high, prepared to continue what he started.

"Tell him, Mudblood!" Draco orders while shaking my arm to hurry me along. His best course of action is to get me away from this scene as soon as possible. However, he doesn't wait for me to respond. Instead, he interjects, "Never mind. She's a stubborn piece of scum, Master. She won't break unless I force it out of her. I'll only need a moment." He starts to shove me back into the trees, and I'm not sure if his aggression is part of the act or because he's so furious with me.

"I'll tell you! Get off me, Malfoy!! I'll tell you! Just promise to call off the fight. I'm not offering up anything until you do!" I twist and then sneer at Draco, "And I'm an exceptional Occlumens! You won't find any of my memories without my help!"

"CRUCIO!"

Tired of the show, Voldemort casts the spell behind Draco's back, surprising us both.

"*NO!*" Draco shouts as I fall.

My face hits the forest floor as my bones seem to shatter into pieces. I'm on fire, tormented by horrific, nightmarish sights as I writhe on the ground. My body tenses with crippling agony. It feels like it will never end.

Shards of glass pierce my skin.

I thrash and shake.

I'm back on the floor at the Revel, overcome by pain, while Draco towers over me, helpless.

But then it stops. Voldemort lifts his curse while I gasp for breath.

"No? Draco?"

"M— My Lord, I think she's telling the truth. Please, just hear her out. I — I don't want you to miss any important opportunity that could lead to you winning the war. You've been furious about how Potter seems to be evading you. This witch knows everything. Let's not damage her—" his voice cracks, "— yet."

Voldemort considers Draco's words, while I suck air into my lungs, feeling them burn with the aftershocks of the Unforgiveable. My mouth is gritty with dirt, and sound weaves in and out of my awareness as Death Eaters cheer.

"You called Harry to you," I cough, still unable to move. "But you're about to make a grave mistake!"

An eerie quiet follows as my words settle amongst those present. Voldemort's Death Eaters don't know what to make of this new development. They wait for a clue regarding how to react.

"What do you mean?"

His voice is quiet and cold.

"I'll tell you everything — how to live forever, and win the war. You can see for yourself in my memories. Just promise you won't hurt anyone else." I moan.

As I considered all the information I had, I made some big assumptions. My younger self was suspicious that Harry was a Horcrux, but she wasn't sure. Also, Voldemort was intent on killing Harry, which didn't seem like a smart idea if Harry carried a piece of his soul within him. It didn't make sense until I realized Voldemort likely didn't intend to embed a sacred piece of himself inside his enemy.

But I don't have enough information to be sure.

I hold my breath, waiting to see if he will be curious enough to listen longer. If he curses me again, I might not be able to withstand it. Or worse, if he lets Draco drag me away, this entire evening could be for nothing.

"*Leave us!*" Voldemort rages at his soldiers. Then, obedient to a fault, they turn and leave as quickly as possible, not wanting to defy the psychotic freak. But Draco stands firm.

Voldemort shifts to face him. "All of you. *Now!*"

"Sir, I can be of service —"

"Leave," he seethes.

Draco's devastation claws at our bond, but his hands are tied. I feel him arguing with himself every step of the way as he disappears back into the forest. Time slows as I close my eyes and imagine what our story could've been like if tonight had gone differently. I see us finding a safe, quiet place to hide as we rebuild our lives. We settle in, finding comfort in one another for months, never leaving our home. Then eventually, I start to garden. Draco brews potions. We take long walks and appreciate the life-giving benefits of nature. We grow older, and when time heals us, we decide that the world is safe enough for children. *Oh Godric.*

"Get up."

When Draco's gone, Voldemort bends to loom over me, snarling as I'm still flat on the ground.

Despite my excruciating pain, I stumble to my feet. Then, when I'm at my full height, I clutch at my side and drag in a tight breath.

"Explain yourself," his words are a threat.

"You win the war tonight, but only because you do exactly what I say."

Voldemort's eyes blow wide, and he shifts his weight. He looks thrown as he considers me.

"Capture Harry, hold him prisoner, but don't kill him."

"What are you talking about you disgusting Mudblood?"

"I know way more than you think. I've seen things. I know what each of your *seven* Horcruxes are, and I know how many of them are still left. I know what weapons the Order is close to securing. Weapons, that could destroy you. But I also know that you win anyways."

"*HOW!?*"

Voldemort slashes his wand, immobilizing me, then slams into my mind. I only have a second to prepare, but I knew he wouldn't take my word. I knew he would try to force the information from my mind. I pull forward the memory of visiting Diagon Alley last year and show him glimpses of a future he could enjoy — one where he rules with an iron fist and those who are Muggleborn are enslaved. I flash to the Revel, where he towers over my prone body as the room full of Death Eaters cheer, then shift to stacks of the *Daily Prophets* I read so that he can glimpse titles extolling his greatness for winning the war.

He pulls from my mind. "What was *that?* " He fists my collar and sneers, inches from my face.

"Your future."

Manipulating Voldemort to do as I want is tricky. I knew he would use Ligillimency on me and I couldn't let him see any of my love story with Draco. Letting him search for the memories I've never uncovered would only lead to me passing out on the forest floor. So, showing him the future was my only viable solution.

He raises his wand to my face, asking, "You're a Seer?"

"Yes." I stand my ground, hoping to look convincing, when I demand, "I've seen what happens tonight and I know that there's no stopping it, but I want to do what I can to save my

friends. I will give you all the information I have if you spare their lives tonight. Go, stop the battle and spare them, then I'll tell you how to win the war."

A wicked smile creeps across his face as a man's voice yells from behind us, "Voldemort, I'm here!"

Following the sound, I see Harry Potter standing near the edge of the trees.

"Hermione?" When he sees me, Harry looks confused.

"Do it, now!" I whisper, urging Voldemort into action. "Capture him, but *don't* kill him. It's important. Once you end the battle, I'll explain everything." Then, as he turns to face his unintended Horcrux, I cry, "Harry, I'm so sorry!"

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Before Harry can process everything, he freezes and drops to the ground.

My head hurts. I've done it. I've given up my best friend and ended the war for Voldemort. My breath catches in my throat as I realize the full extent of my actions. I'm nauseous as Voldemort laughs manically. He raises both hands as if celebrating his success, then touches his wand to his forehead.

In a matter of seconds, all of his followers return. They enter the clearing and stare at Harry's frozen form. I feel Draco behind me. His presence is both comforting and foreboding.

"Potter fell at the end of my wand!" Voldemort cackles.

Shocked, it takes a second before the Death Eaters respond. Then, they erupt into loud cheers that rouse the huge imprisoned man.

"Harry? *No!? Harry!!* " He cries.

Voldemort ignores the wailing giant, letting his followers praise him for a minute before barking, "Enough! Traverse, go fetch Severus' Petrifying Potion!" The man he addressed nods, then leaves in a hurry. "Draco, secure my new Seer. You can interrogate her further after we settle this battle."

He waves his wand, lifting Harry into the air. Then he releases the large man and forces him to cradle Harry's body. The man continues to sob. "Harry! Hermione! *No!!*

Then Voldemort yells, "Now, we head to the castle!"

"I'll be right back," Draco growls into my ear as he casts a binding spell to secure me to a nearby tree. "Stay put until I return. *I can't believe you lied to me again!*" He doesn't take my wand, ensuring I have it hidden before following the rest of his colleagues. He shoots me a final scathing look, grinding his locked jaw.

Then he spits, "It's finished, Lord. She won't be going anywhere."

Voldemort grins, "Then come."

I watch everyone follow the evil monster into the trees and Draco falling in line behind his leader. Everything went as I hoped, but now the rest is up to him. Draco will need to handle the other details, and I pray that he follows through on our plan to get Voldemort to petrify everyone instead of killing them. Tears begin to streak down my face as I slip free from my bindings.

I stand in the silent field, wrestling with my disobedience. Draco is so hurt.

The moment has come, but I still ache to stay in 1998. How can I do this? Why can't I stay with this Draco and madly in love? I wipe a tear from my cheek, slowly pulling out the time-turner and twisting the dial. Every click it makes causes me to cringe, but I keep going, drawing up May 15, 2005—seven years from now.

Just then, Draco crashes through the trees, having snuck away from the invading army.

"Goddamn it, Hermione! What the *FUCK* were you thinking! *You could've been KILLED!!* " he bellows

In the background, I hear, "Harry Potter is Dead!"

While Draco glances over his shoulder at the sound of his Master's booming voice, I hurry to cast a protective barrier between us. The crushing sadness in my heart hurts my entire body.

When he turns back to me, Draco catches my expression, and the world crumbles beneath our feet. He feels my devastation through the bond. I watch him check in with our connection before pure rage distorts his features.

Furious, he takes a few more steps forward before running into the barrier I had the foresight to construct. He slams his fists on the magical wall and then snarls, "Hermione, what the hell are you up to!?"

Then, with a terrified expression, he pats his pockets, searching for the turner. I feel his insides turn to ash as he comes up empty. I'm ash as well. I scrunch my eyes to ward off my overwhelming shame. I don't want to remember how hurt he looks.

"Draco, please believe that I love you! I had to do this! Time is fixed!"

Our magical core spikes and rips. It's so tense that it hurts. "Don't you *fucking* say that, Hermione!!" He slams his fists again, looking gutted.

I sob, "You have to capture me. You *have* to get me to — to fear you. You need to get me to run from you so that we end up together."

I meet him at the ward and press my hands to his to feel his touch one last time. It isn't the same, though, and the move causes him to see the time-turner held behind my back.

His eyes blow wide, and he hammers on the invisible wall between us. "*WITCH, YOU BETTER NOT USE THAT, I SWEAR TO GOD!*"

This is worse than any torture I felt at the hands of Bellatrix or Voldemort. *This* is the worst I will ever feel; it is all my fault.

"I have to! And you need to do everything you witnessed in my memories, promise me! It's the only way to win the war—the only way to save them all. You *need* to get me to this point. Promise me!

" *NO!* I won't do that. I don't care who it saves!"

He's desperate now. Tears fill his eyes, and he swipes them away with his forearm as he begs me not to leave him. It's a devastating contradiction to see my powerful husband reduced to tears. All the authority and bravado he usually wears are gone, and what's left is a destroyed man crying out to the one he loves and begging her not to leave him. "Hermione, don't do this. You don't know that time works like that, we talked about this! Please."

My voice breaks as I whisper, "It *does*. I know that now. Please, you have to believe me!"

I tap the turner, and it begins to glow. Its light feels like a noose. I'm leaving the love of my life, traumatizing him, all for the sake of a world I've never known. My fingers twitch as I shake with misery. We're both crying now. This is agonizing. I ache to remove the ward and forget about anyone but us. But I can't. So, instead, I close my eyes.

Dropping his voice, hoping he won't spook me, Draco begs, "Don't, Hermione. You swore you'd stay. We had a plan. Nothing's changed. Come here, you're not safe without me."

I want to fall into his embrace. I'm desperate to stay with him.

As I prepare to do the unthinkable, my younger self stumbles through the woods, confused and scared. I say my final goodbye to the woman I will never truly know and speak to my husband in a pathetic, defeated voice, "Everything's changed. You changed it."

I tap the turner again as Draco roars, "*HERMIONE, NO!!*"

"Close your eyes, love. You're okay. I'm here with you." I offer my parting words in hopes that they will soothe him the way they used to for me.

Then I tap the turner one last time.

Watching me go, Draco spins around. The last thing I see is him violently casting a memory spell at my younger self's unsuspecting face.

"FUCK!!"

My eyes are dry and painful as I open them to find a tall man sitting in a chair in the corner of the room. When he sees I'm awake, he quickly moves to the bed and wraps me in his arms.

"You're okay."

Tears sting my eyes as his large hands cup my cheeks, and he wipes the salty drops away.

Then he soothes, "Shh, you're okay. I'm here."

My voice shakes as I pull my legs to my chest and ask, "Where am I?"

Chapter 29: The Man

Chapter Summary

"If only we could start again,
I would find a way,
To never have to give you up
I know it all depends,
If you still feel the same,
Is your love still strong enough?"

-Shut Us Down, Freddie Dickson

1998

"This is our home."

The man is really close to me.

Is he a threat? Should I run? If so, then to where?

I swallow, but my mouth is dry. My body shakes, and my breathing is tight.

Scanning my surroundings, I register that I'm on a plush mattress in a bedroom where everything is gold. It's on the doorknobs to the patio, the lamps, and even molded around the fireplace mantel's intricate corbels. Flames crackle in the hearth before me, and the sconces are dim. The room seems comfortable, but how did I get here?

Shit!

I stare at my hands and feel my heart in my throat. I'm nauseated, and my head is spinning.

"...terrible war."

What?

He touches my arms, so I dart my eyes from his hands, rubbing up and down my skin to his soft gaze and back. In my chest, there's a pull to him. It's leading me forward. I don't think I need to run. I think he's kind, but even so, tears spill down my cheeks.

He's still talking. I didn't catch what he said. Was it something about a memory charm? Oh, Goddric.

Wiping my eyes, I slink away from his warm touch and gather my courage to ask, "Who are you?"

The man pulls his hand away slowly and sits back. His piercing silver eyes are vast pools of pain.

Shame fills my stomach with lead. I don't want to hurt him, but I'm so confused, and I need answers.

I continue to observe him while he sits back and runs his large hand through his white-blond hair. He's striking. He has a strong jawline and straight, white teeth. In fact, his only imperfection is a small scar above his eye. I attempt to take a deep breath but still can't fill my lungs. However, the act brings to my attention that he smells good. His crisp white shirt and tailored black pants drip with money, too. But the way he closes his eyes and clears his throat tells me my question wounded him.

"I'm Draco," he says in a deep voice once he collects himself.

Okay, he's Draco. I scrunch my eyes and try to pull any memory of him to the forefront but feel myself slam against a wall in my mind. *Damn!* It hurts to think.

Since my memory isn't helping, the stranger sitting on the bed beside me is my best source of information. I drop my eyes to my hands and rub my toes together under the thick, green duvet.

How can I be so lost? I'm a witch. I'm an adult. I...I...

I start to panic when I can't remember anything else.

A tear drops into my hands as I ask another question — this time one that wounds *me*. "—and, who —am I?"

"My name is Hermione Malfoy. Hermione. Her—mi—o—ne."

The word sounds funny on my tongue as I stare at myself in the mirror. My thick, curly, brown hair is wet from a recent shower, and my eyes...are ...

I wipe the fog off the mirror, and it squeaks in response as I lean in.

My eyes are light brown.

I bend even closer.

— with gold around the irises.

Standing straight again, I pull back my towel to examine my figure. I'm decent-looking. My arms are skinny, but my curves are nice.

Then, I press my hands to my chest, feeling the weight of my breasts, before pulling my lips to one side and tilting my head.

Not bad.

"Hermione?"

I jump out of my skin in response to his low voice. I wrap my towel tighter, then run my hands over my mane of curls, straightening my hair. The bathroom door is closed, but I still feel vulnerable and exposed.

"Just a second!"

"Do you need anything?" He says through the wood.

"No!" I blurt out. I can't handle him right now, and I certainly don't want him coming into the bathroom!

After a pause, he says, "Okay... Well, let me know if you think of anything." His voice is quieter, causing me to move toward the door.

Why would I need his help? I'm not *that* useless. I know how to bathe myself.

I grasp my towel tighter, feeling the softness. Then, realizing something that I do need, I groan.

"Wait!" I hear his footsteps slow, so I continue. "Can you bring me some clothes?"

Before showering, I looked in the closet and was surprised to find only his outfits. Maybe my closet is somewhere else?

I roll my eyes. Of course, he would know where my closet is. This curious man has lived with me for years.

Well, actually, he didn't say how long we've been married. But regardless, he knows where *all* my things are, so he certainly knows where I keep my clothes.

My stomach drops.

He's seen me naked!

I can't think about that too much. One step at a time, Hermione. All I need to do right now is put on some clothes and find food. I'm starving, and my head is killing me.

I hear him mumble a derisive laugh to himself as if that question was ironic. So, in a self-conscious impulse, I holler at the door, "What is funny about needing clothes?"

It's silent for a moment then he answers, "I'm sorry. It's not you. I just had Deja Vu."

Okay, whatever, guy. Enjoy your inside joke. I cross my arms and scowl.

Then, he adopts a more somber tone "Of course, I'll bring you something," he says, so I wait until I hear him leave, return, and leave again.

Inching out of the ensuite, I check to ensure he's gone. Then, I breathe a deep sigh of relief before walking across the room to inspect what he left me. A long gray jumper and some soft black pants are lying on the freshly made bed. I pick them up and notice the knickers and bra folded neatly underneath. Glowering, I pull it all on and walk to the hall.

The bedroom door is heavy, and when I open it, I find Draco leaning against the wall, his arms hugged to his chest.

He looks tired as he taps his wand against his arm but raises his eyes to greet me.

"Everything okay?"

I rub my arms to gain confidence more than warmth before replying. "Yeah, um, I'm hungry."

Draco pushes off the wall and steps toward me as if to grab my hand. But then he stops himself and nods towards the large, stone stairwell. "Come on."

I follow him down the hall as he asks, "What would you like?" He tilts his head back to reassure me. "I can get you whatever sounds good."

He's very eager.

Suddenly, my head throbs, so I stop to steady myself on the wall. When I do, my hand slips on a large painting frame. I stumble as the canvas groans and tips. I bet the thing hasn't moved in a hundred years.

"Millie!" He barks as I grab my forehead, wincing.

Then, a small elf pops into the hall next to us. "Yes, Master?" she asks. When she sees me, she cries, "Oh, Mrs! Yous awake!"

"Bring another pain potion, then call the Healer."

Draco bends to inspect my expression as the elf vanishes and reappears. She hands him a small bottle and takes off again. All the appearing and disappearing doesn't help my migraine.

"Chin up, love. You need to take things slowly. You've been... out ...for a while." He pops the cork off the bottle one-handed, then reaches to tilt my head and dip the liquid down my throat.

But, I throw out a hand, warding him off. "I'm not taking anything from you!" I snap, a little too harsh. The silence that follows is deafening.

Once the wave of pain passes, I straighten and find Draco stiff as a board. He's stone, staring down at me and biting his tongue. A moment passes as he chooses his words carefully. Then he corks the phial again and holds it out to me. "It's just a pain potion. You can see for yourself —"

"I'm *not* taking anything from you," I repeat, quieter but just as adamant.

He clenches his jaw as his eyes burn. There's something there. It's almost like he's entertaining a bratty child. "But you trust me to feed you?"

I consider his question as my stomach rumbles. Then I let out a defeated sigh, raising my watery eyes to his. "No." This is so frustrating. "But, I'm hungry," I mumble, sounding pathetic. I hate this.

Draco paces back and forth, looking frustrated. Then he stops, and his tone is cautious. "Okay, I know you're scared." He shifts like he wants to reach for me again but stops and shoves his hands in his pockets. Then he takes a steadying breath. "How about this?" He turns to look down the hall again, then back at me. "Do you recall what Veritaseram is?"

Do I?

I consider his question, then try, "A truth potion."

He looks relieved. "That's right."

Thank God I haven't lost everything. Relieved, I attempt to recover how I knew that — any memory where I used the potion or brewed it, maybe, but then I pull in a quick, pained breath through my clenched teeth.

"Don't push yourself," he demands, seeing me wince. He waits for the pain to pass before adding, "I'll have Millie make you something to eat, then you can watch me take Veritaserum and ask me if it's safe." He lowers his head, raising his eyebrows in a question. "Would that make you feel more comfortable?"

"Yes," I whisper.

"Okay," He takes a deep breath and then holds out his hand, directing me back to where I just came from. "She'll bring a tray to our bedroom. You're not ready to head downstairs yet."

That sounds good. He's probably right, but before I follow his direction, I brace myself to ask, "*Our* bedroom?"

He bends his neck to look at his shoes. I'm pretty sure he doesn't want me to see his honest reaction. "No, sorry, your bedroom. I'll find somewhere else."

Dinner was delicious. Millie brought me pork tenderloin and mashed potatoes, which coated my soul and helped revive me. Then the Healer came. He was a small man with graying hair who examined me while Draco watched over me, looking stern. Everything was fine, except he directed a curious question to Draco. It was something about an *interrogation*? That didn't make sense, but I probably just didn't understand the metaphor. Regardless, the Healer prescribed rest and offered another pain potion, which I again refused. Afterward, Draco said he would give me some space, but he told me to find him if I needed anything. Then I paced around my room for an hour.

Now, I'm padding down the corridor in search of my *husband*.

That still feels weird.

I've had a while to think, but my thoughts are jumbled, and I'm scared alone, so even though it makes me nervous, I'm seeking him out.

The portraits in the gilded frames directed me to a room a few doors away, where a soft light glows from the cracked door. When I reach it, I peer in and see him sitting by a roaring fire with a glass tumbler in his hand. He's hanging his head, looking tormented by the day's events, which makes me feel guilty.

He's different like this. It's as if this is the real man, not the stoic, helpful persona he employs to soothe me. This man carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. He's old beyond his years and sad.

I'm sure he's grieving the loss of me too. I wish I could remember for both of our sakes.

My stomach twists, and suddenly, I feel like I'm intruding on a private moment, so I turn to leave. However, his head shoots up, and he spots me when the door groans.

"Hermione, did you need something?" He asks, sounding hopeful.

I roll my lips and close my eyes, then damn the universe as I say, "No, not really."

The dark hall stretches out before me as he searches my expression. His hands are on the armrests, but he hasn't stood up yet. He's trying not to startle me.

"I just didn't want to be alone."

I pick at my fingernails, avoiding his eye. I hate feeling vulnerable. I rub my fingers together and try to warm them. Then I realize something. I'm not wearing a wedding ring. I flip my hand over to examine it further. There isn't even an impression of where a ring might have rested. Then, I shake my head. What a stupid thing to worry about. I have much more pressing curiosities.

Back in protector mode, Draco walks to the door and holds it open, welcoming me into his space. Then he follows me to the chairs by the fire. "You're not alone," he insists. "Come sit with me. We can chat. Or, if you prefer, we can just be together. Whatever you need is fine."

I sit on the edge of the chair as he returns to the one facing mine. There's tension between us as a clock on the desk ticks. But then, something changes. I feel better — safer. Being around him feels right and comfortable, so I pull my feet under me and melt into the cushy wingback.

"I have so many questions," I admit while staring at the flames.

"I know you do."

We let the air settle around us again, enjoying each other's company for a few minutes before I work up the courage to ask, "You said something about a war?"

He takes a slow sip of his drink and the ice clinks in the glass. Draco runs his finger over the rim and steadies himself. "Yes, but it's over now." He knocks back some more alcohol, then places his glass on the side table in between our chairs. "The final battle was a month ago.

You've been — uh— " he pauses, takes a deep breath, and puffs out a long sigh. "— at the hospital recovering." Running his hands through his hair, he finishes. "But, you're back home and safe now." With that last statement, it almost sounds as if he is reassuring himself more than me.

He doesn't seem to enjoy talking about the war, but he's trying, and I appreciate that. "And I had something to do with ending it?"

That sounds intriguing. Apparently, I'm the kind of person who has the power to end wars.

I shift in my seat.

— Or at least I used to be.

Draco looks like a world of grief presses upon him as he stares into the flames. It's a long time before he responds. "Yes, but we can talk more about that some other time."

"Okay," I concede. That sounds like a big story anyway, and I need to digest everything slowly. So, I start smaller. "What are some of my favorite things?"

My easy question casts away some of Draco's demons. He smiles, then sits up straighter and starts to give me a glimpse into my personality. "You love to read, which means you're incredibly smart and you're passionate about learning." He laughs, "You were always in the library when we were at school together. You almost spent more time there than in your Common Room."

I brush my curls behind my ear, trying to sound light. "We went to school together?"

"Yes, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

He scans my features as he speaks, looking for any amount of recollection in my response. But the name means nothing to me, so I barrel on, trying to avoid the elephant in the room.

"And I was a nerd?"

Mid-drink, Draco nearly chokes. "Yes," he laughs.

This conversation is easier. Okay, I can do this. Baby steps, Hermione!

"So, you're into brainy witches?"

He casts a side eye at me. "Not really *witches* just you."

"Oh, so your other girlfriends were dim?"

Draco drops his eyes to his lap, thinking. As he fingers the rim of the glass again I notice that he isn't wearing a wedding ring either. Maybe we aren't into that sort of thing.

"No, love," he offers a warm smile. "I was never really serious with anyone until you."

I blanch, taking that in. His response draws me from my wandering, curious mind. Draco sits next to me, essentially a Greek god. I find it hard to believe he didn't date around.

"Seriously? That doesn't seem right."

"It's the truth. You were my first and only witch," he says with a self-deprecating shrug. "And we didn't get on at first. We got together after leaving school."

Feeling bold, I huff a laugh. I like the way this gorgeous man lights up when he smiles. "Really? That sounds fishy. What else kept your attention?"

Suddenly, the air chills.

Draco's smile fades, and he looks haunted again. I shrink into myself, waiting for him to respond. My question hit a nerve, and I wonder why. He stares at nothing for a long time before clearing his throat.

"I was busy with other responsibilities."

"Within the hallowed halls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Arithmancy stands as a beacon of scholarly pursuit. Students, with quills poised and minds alight, delve into the ancient art of numerical augury, deciphering the intricate language of numbers to unveil the secrets of the cosmos."

I could listen to Draco read for the rest of my life and be happy. Something about the deep solace of his voice, the warm room, and the comfortable sheets helps calm my scared and anxious mind.

I readjust the pillow under my head and snuggle into the down feather embrace.

Last night was rough, but I'm okay now. I tossed and turned until dawn, trying to sleep in a huge, strange home while worrying about who I am, what happened to bring me to this place, and how I'll recover myself. Draco was like a lifeline when he knocked on my door a couple of hours ago. I pretended like I was fine, but I was crawling out of my skin. So I opened the door wider to let him in as he gave me a knowing smile. The man seems to know everything I'm thinking or feeling. He knows me so well that it's like we're connected on a deeper level. But, when he stepped into the room, he didn't point out that I was a nervous wreck. That was kind of him. He just levitated in a giant stack of books, asking if he could read to me, which I was quick to affirm.

Draco is sitting in the corner of the room. He had Millie bring me Jasmine tea to calm my nerves and the cup and saucer are now resting on my night table. He looks more casual today, somehow. We talked for a long time before I came back to my room last night, which helped soothe both of us. It seems like the more we are together, the better we feel. Thank God I have at least one sure foundation in my life right now.

I keep listening as I close my eyes. With him here, I finally feel like I can relax. I just need a minute to rest.

The popping fire coaxes me from my heavy sleep, but I lay still for a moment, drinking in the comfort. When I eventually open my eyes again, it's dusk. Draco sits in the chair by the window where he was hours ago. However, now he's scowling at a newspaper, which he folds when he sees I'm awake.

"Hey, there," he says, smiling.

I shimmy up to rest against the headboard, then brush my hair out of my face.

"I was out all day?"

Before he can answer, the air tingles, and Draco's eyes heat. Last night, after I showered, Draco filled the walk-in closet in my room with what looks like my entire wardrobe. I spent a while running my hands over the soft fabrics on the hangers, wondering what I was like when I wore those outfits. Then I closed the door and walked away. It was too hard to consider. The pajamas Millie brought me before bed are comfortable but thin, and he's distracted for a moment, staring at me. Feeling his gaze, I cross my arms over my chest so that he doesn't see my nipples pebble and my skin turn to gooseflesh in response. Then, he remembers himself, shaking his head to clear away whatever was going through his mind.

"Yes." He stands and vanishes his paper and mug before walking to the closet. "It's going to take a while for you to recover from the accident," his voice is muffled from the other room. A minute later he returns and holds out a robe for me.

My cheeks warm as I take it from him, trying to move past the awkwardness.

"Well, actually, I didn't sleep well last night."

I thread my arms through the sleeves, one after the next, as his kind eyes remind me that he already knew that.

"Food?"

"Yes, please."

Draco flicks his wand and a bell chimes by the door. Moments later, steamed broccoli and roast chicken appear on the desk. He moves to pick up the tray and bring it to me, but I stop him.

"I'll eat over there," I say, standing. I head to the desk, sit, and cut my chicken with the heavy silver fork and knife. The first bite causes me to moan with pleasure. I eat a little more as Draco stares out the window with his hands in his pockets. Then I grump, "I'll never be able to fall asleep tonight now that I slept all day."

He turns and sits again, resting his elbows on his knees, leaning forward. "Are you still opposed to taking potions from me?"

I consider that question while sipping some sparkling water. The food has been safe, he hasn't tried to do anything to me other than care for me. Despite my grumpiness at times, he's remained kind and patient. Plus, every fiber of my being tells me to trust him.

"No, I guess."

"I can bring you a calming draught or dreamless sleep if you like."

I let out a sardonic laugh, trying to sound easygoing. "I seem calm enough when you're around. Maybe you should just stay."

"I can if you'd prefer."

My fork hangs in mid-air, and my eyes widen.

"Oh, I didn't — I,"

My stomach drops as I consider what it would be like to sleep with him near me. It might help me feel safer. But, what if he expects me to move faster than I'm ready intimately. Letting him move back in here would cross a line that I couldn't get back. What if he doesn't like living with me now that I'm such a mess. I'm just getting my feet under me. I can't —

"It's okay. You're alright," Draco soothes me as I start to spiral.

I pull in a tight breath, then attempt to stab some broccoli with my shaky hand.

"Right, well I'm not ready to uh—."

"Hermione." His voice is soft as he continues trying to talk me down off the ledge.

"No, it's fine. I'm fine. Um, yeah, I'll take a Dreamless Sleep."

He tilts his head, scouring my expression as I stare at my plate. "Okay, I'll go fetch it." Draco's voice is quiet and deep when he stands and walks out the door. He could summon the potion or ask Millie to bring it, but he must also need space.

When he returns twenty minutes later, I'm dressed and standing in the middle of the room, waiting for him. I've had time to shove all my anxiety into a corner in my mind and get my head on straight. He was just being kind. He wasn't trying to force me into anything. He has done nothing but respect my space and privacy. I'm fine. This is fine. I don't want him to think that I'm nuttier than he thought so I put on a brave smile and welcome him back.

His eyebrows raise, and he stands in the doorway with his hand on the knob, taking in my new mood. He's holding the potion, and it looks like he also had time to recover.

"So," I hedge. "I'd like to see the rest of your.. *er*...our home now."

"Okay." His gaze softens.

He holds the door open, and I walk under his arm into the hall. Draco guides me through the *blooming* mansion that is his home as I try to keep my chin off the floor. After what feels like an hour, we stop in the home's gigantic atrium to chat.

"So wait," I turn when reaching the first step of the sweeping staircase. Draco is just behind me, now at more of my eye level. "How many rooms are there?!"

"Bedrooms?" He shrugs. "Twenty-five maybe I'm not sure. I've never bothered to count."

"And you live here alone?"

That question catches us both off guard and puts a sour taste in his mouth.

"We do, yes." He carries on trying to smooth over the gaff. "There are beautiful gardens as well, if you'd like to see tomorrow, I can show you."

"I'm sorry, Draco. I'm trying, but this is hard to get used to." I blurt out, attempting to address the obvious.

He's quiet for a minute, choosing his words like always. Then he responds, "It's okay. I understand."

There is another long pause where I admire the artistry of the large room. When I take a steadying breath to continue our conversation, I see Draco staring at a place on the floor in the center of the atrium. He looks grief-stricken and angry as he rubs at his forehead, massaging his scar.

Then, in an instant, he pulls on a mask, hiding his true feelings from view.

I shuffle my feet and avoid his eye contact, sighing. "You don't have to pretend like everything's okay. I know this is hard for you too."

Draco stares as if seeing me for the first time. He's curious and sad. He rests his hand on the wide, limestone railing and shifts his weight to his back foot.

"Thank you."

I roll my lips, gazing into his deep, thoughtful eyes and try to imagine what it felt like to fall in love with him.

"You miss her."

"You *are* her," he sighs, dismissing me, and sounding robotic.

"You know what I mean," I rest my weight on my hip, trying to connect with my so-called husband. We'll never get anywhere if he keeps trying to hide his emotions from me. "It's okay, really."

The room's emptiness feels suffocating as I watch him wrestle with himself.

Then, slowly, he nods.

"I miss her."

Chapter 30: The Future

Chapter Summary

"You are broken on the floor
And you're crying, crying
He has done this all before
But you're lying, lying
To yourself that he'll find help
That he will change to someone else
But you're broken on the floor
Still asking him for more."
-Broken, Isak Danielson

Chapter Notes

Okay, lovely readers, we're back!

I have written the end of this piece and will be releasing the last ten chapters once a week from here on out.

I appreciate your patience as I worked out the rest of this story. I had a hard time figuring out how I wanted to structure the end. I didn't know if I wanted to tell the rest (somewhat) sequentially or go with what my gut was telling me, which is how it ended up. I was also struggling with whether or not to make this final part into a sequel and ultimately decided that it needed to stay a single story.

The remainder of this story will bounce back and forth between 1998 and 2005. In my mind, these two stories were always happening in parallel realities, so they needed to be told that way. I always knew essentially what was going to happen but needed the time to work out the 'how.'

I hope you enjoy the end of this work. Thank you so much for sticking with it up until this point! Happy reading!

May 2005

I trip forward when the world stops spinning, catching myself on a large gnarled tree branch. In the thrumming silence, I take a moment to catch my breath and wipe my tears from my eyes.

I did it.

I've left him.

Oh God, he looked so destroyed.

My arms shake, and my thoughts blur with the adrenaline from the battle — from everything I was forced to do. But, the forest around me is now dark and quiet as I stand alone in the clearing. The effect is bone-chilling.

The emptiness I feel matches the scene around me.

Letting out a gasp, I clutch at my chest, then grab handfuls of my curls and clench my jaw, screaming in frustration.

How did everything turn out so sideways!?

A shadow shifts behind me, causing me to whip around in fear to find Draco leaning against a tree. He stands when he sees me, and I catch the look of relief across his features.

Then, I only have a moment to fist my wand tightly as he casts a summoning spell. Refusing to let him have the upper hand again, I grasp my magical lifeline.

However, it isn't my access to magic that he steals.

The time turner flies out of my left hand, and I watch in anger as Draco snatches it out of thin air and vanishes it, along with any thoughts of turning back.

"What are you doing!?" I snarl, then throw my wand up, aiming at his chest. "Don't come anywhere near me."

A soft breeze skates over the forest floor, rustling the leaves on low-hanging branches. My heartbeat hammers, but the scene around me feels like it's trying to slow my movements. It's incredibly unnerving to move from a battle scene to the stillness around us.

Now, my only threat is my husband.

"Welcome back," he drawls.

Then, before turning on the spot, he adds, "I'll see you back at the Manor."

Before I can yell a scathing remark, he's gone.

He must have waited here all evening. But then, why turn and leave so quickly? He's placing a lot of trust in me that I'll follow him home like a lost pup. He can go to hell.

Why is he back at the Manor? When did we move from the penthouse?

My mind races with thousands of questions as I fist my wand, scanning my surroundings and checking over each shoulder.

I'm numb as I try to catch up with everything that has happened.

I'm back in the present, or at least the correct timeline. This is uncharted territory. Neither Draco nor I have any clue what will happen. But now we both know parts of the past. I need to verify if the future is how I remember it because it would be just my luck that after all of my manipulation of the past, things *did* change here somehow.

But then...?

When I have a minute to catch my breath, I reflect on everything that has occurred over the past few hours. My actions were evident after the Draco from 2005 visited me in the Forbidden Forest. I was so focused on setting in motion parts of history that I didn't take the time to think about what it would be like to return to the future.

I collapse on the mossy ground and stay there for hours, my head swimming. I'm paralyzed with indecision until the sun rises and peaks through the canopy above me. The dots of light catch my eye as they dance along my skin. Waking from my fog, I hold my arm out in front of me and tilt it this way and that, watching the muted light flicker over my scar. Then, my stomach growls, and I hunch over, feeling nauseous.

I need food and sleep before I'll be able to think clearly.

So, I croak, "Millie?"

Scrunching my eyes, I rub my forehead while waiting for the telltale *Pop!* of her arrival.

"Mrs.?"

She's wearing a green dress and a wool jumper. I stare at her, trying to wrap my mind around everything she knows and doesn't know, and take in the patterned cloth on her shoulder. It's covered in stars and moons and stains. She must have been cleaning when I called for her.

"What day is it?" I sigh.

"May 15." She pauses but then remembers and hurries to add, "2005."

Well, at least that worked out how I intended.

When I arrived in 1997, I traveled to July 22, five days before Harry Potter's birthday, and exactly seven years from when I left. When setting the date to return this evening, I used the same logic and chose May 15, 2005. I didn't want to risk misunderstanding the time-turner's magic. Maybe it only travels so far into the past or future if you arrive in the same month and day you leave. Regardless, I didn't have enough information to try anything different, so instead of returning to the exact date and time that I originally traveled back in time, July 22, 2004, I headed ten months further into the future.

Ten months.

The exact amount of time I got to spend with Draco when our love was pure.

"Take me to our vacation house."

My mouth is dry, causing me to sound hoarse, and the statement surprises her. She tilts her head and shifts her weight from one foot to the other. "Where?"

"Millie, don't play dumb." I growl, clearing my throat. I rub the back of my hand over my mouth, then use a large, dewy rock to my left to help me push up from the ground. "I'm not

going back to the Manor to live with Draco. I want you to take me to the vacation home we stayed at the month before the final battle. I know you know what I'm talking about."

"But, Master Draco wants you home —" she hedges. Then, seeing my hostile expression she changes her tune.

"Okay."

I drop her hand as soon as we land, then stomp into the little cottage. It's eerie. Everything looks untouched from the moment I left. The patio chair sits back from the table as if I just stood up to grab a cup of tea. However, when I open the door, I wheeze while waving away the dust and coughing into my elbow. The stale air doesn't deter me. Instead, I plow forward, through the living room and into the kitchen. When I stop in the doorway, I heave a tormented sigh.

This is where I found Draco eating breakfast before we decided to get married on Grasmoor. I drop my eyes and spin my wedding ring around my finger, remembering the cherished vows we made to one another.

"Master came back," Millie whispers as she approaches, shuffling her small feet across the wood floors. When I don't turn to face her, she continues.

"After you left, he stayed here for a month. He so sad."

My stomach clenches as I ball my hands to ward off the tension in my body.

"Don't," I demand, but my voice catches in my throat.

I can't hear this right now. Millie is talking about what happened as if it's in the past, but for me, it's happening *now*. Back in 1998, Draco is here.

As if a ghost were to pass by me, a shiver runs up my neck, causing me to spin toward the front door again. I can see him pushing it open and staring into the dark, empty space if I squint. I envision his tortured expression as he lets out a shuttered sigh and then marches to the bedroom.

A tear runs down my cheek as I imagine following in his wake. I shuffle down the hall, brushing my fingers along the wall, somehow knowing Draco did as well. If I press hard enough, I might still be able to feel the warmth his touch left in the stone. Then I push open our bedroom door.

The living room seemed untouched, but now I notice several signs that he returned here after the battle. My notes are gone, and so are my clothes, but some of his clothes remain. Lost, I shuffle to the bar cart to pour Fire Whiskey into the tumbler I saw him use several times. I know the glass is clean, but I still close my eyes and picture our lips touching the rim in the same spot. When I sip the bitter liquor, I grimace. It burns my throat, and I welcome the punishment.

My eyes water from the sting, and I notice something as I brush away the gathered tears. A charcoal drawing of us is framed and propped up in a silver stand on the desk. I set the drink down, hearing it clink, then stagger across the room to inspect the art further. It's an image of my body wrapped around his. He's holding me because I just jumped into his arms. We're kissing, and my hair hangs in front of my face. If anyone else found it, they couldn't determine it was me, but I remember this moment. I had waited for him to return for hours. My nerves were fried. I recall that when he stepped through the flames, I experienced intense relief.

Draco must have drawn the scene from memory. He even took the time to charm the lined figures to move as they embrace.

Gutted, I head to the closet, pull a button-down shirt off the hanger, and wrap myself in it. Then I climb into our bed and curl into a ball, hugging the drawing and imagining that we're lying together, comforting one another. I scrunch my eyes, picturing him on his side facing me, our hands clasped on the covers between us.

"Bring me food, and please leave me alone," I cry, knowing Millie followed me.

Her voice is tender when she says, "Okay, Mrs., okay."

I sleep for days.

Millie returns often. She brings food or tea, but I can't drag myself out of bed. To pass the time, I stare at the bedroom door, pretending I'm back in 1998, waiting for Draco to come home after a long day away. Or, I force myself to nap, hoping to see him in my dreams.

When my body starts to crave Draco's touch, I sink deeper into despair. I don't want the Draco from 2005! Eventually I start to shake with need, so I summon Millie, begging her to bring me a Heat Suppressant. Thankfully, she returns a few hours later with the potion and then waits for me to imbibe before running a cool cloth over my head and soothing me.

"Mrs. loves Master Draco, so deeply. Poor, poor Mrs."

Days later, I'm staring at the wall with the covers drawn under my chin when I hear the front door open. I know it's him. I sensed his presence as soon as he Apparated into the front lawn — before hearing his boots stomp down the hall, and before smelling his cologne.

I take a deep breath and draw upon my courage. I know we need to have this conversation. I've been dreading it for almost a week, but I'm also deadly curious.

Just before he reaches the bedroom, I scrunch my eyes and hold my breath.

"Hermione —."

I've heard his deep voice utter my name like that for years. It sounds so familiar, I ache.

"— that's enough. It's time to come home."

He stands in the doorway, looking stony. I peek under my eyelashes, not moving my head, then close my eyes again, sighing. This man ruined everything. He tore apart our chance at happiness and had the audacity to blame his anger on me.

Our love story was a victim of his actions.

"How could you!?" I moan into my pillow. My body feels heavy with grief, but my magical core purrs to life, being so close to him once more. I hate the contradiction.

A shock of silence between us causes my skin to crawl, but I don't meet his gaze. Draco's spike of anger runs up my arms. He takes several steadying breaths before he growls, "How could *I*?!" Suddenly, he's furious, which makes me snuggle into the mattress with an immature self-satisfaction. " *You* left *me*, witch!"

As if thrown into action again, his words compel me to jump out of bed, gather my tangle of hair into a knot on the top of my head, and straighten my clothes, snarling, "*YOU* made me!!" After days of lethargy, it feels good to do something else with all of my pent-up energy. I wrap my arms around my chest, pulling my sleeves into my fists and grasping them for protection.

Draco's look could kill. He shifts his jaw and shoots daggers at me while summoning from the closet the few clothes Millie brought me over the week. "Whelp, love, time is fixed, now isn't it?" His tone drips with irony as he grabs my beaded bag from the nightstand and shrinks my items to pack them away, adding, "What else do you need to bring?" He's ordering me around again, thinking he can get his way, but I'm done following his every command.

"I'm not going with you," I challenge. However, before the words barely leave my throat, he interrupts.

"The fuck you aren't."

His voice cracks in the air like a whip.

Draco's irritation claws at me, so I shoot mine back over the bond in response. Two can play at this game.

"No, Draco. You aren't dictating my actions anymore."

In response, he tosses the bag on the bed, sneering, "Then I guess we're living here from now on."

I snarl at him and storm to the hall. I can't stand him right now. He's out of his mind if he thinks I will live with him. Arguing is satisfying. I smile when I sense the heat of anger in his chest. The last thing I want to do is discuss things like adults. I want to punish him for tearing us apart.

Draco plants his feet in the doorway, blocking my path, so I shove him to the side and head to the kitchen.

But he grabs my arm. "Don't walk away from me."

I yank from his hold, spitting, "Don't you fucking touch me!"

The air shifts between us, turning our argument from bravado to dangerous. Our bodies are tight as he clamps down on me, pulling me towards his broad shoulder. I sense Draco's mood shift, feeling the scary-calm, authoritative soldier return, so I attempt to shake him off. However, he bends my arm behind my back in a flash, then presses me into the wall, stilling my movements. I buck my legs, trying to break free and thrash around, but then feel his large hand on the back of my head, soothing me.

"Okay, sweetheart, listen, you seem to need some reminding." He presses his forearm across my back to hold me in place as my panic starts to rise. "I'm not the man you left. I won't put up with this."

"Stop it!" I demand, but Draco continues.

"Now, we both know what happened, and how we got here. We've both hurt each other. We've both suffered. But none of that matters. You're coming home."

"Get off me!" I hiss.

"We're bound to each other. There's no getting around it. You need to stop sulking, and get on board with the fact that you're stuck with me. And until the war is over, I call the shots."

I continue to thrash as Draco remains unphased. His sheer size gives him the advantage. Feeling him at my back, I start to panic.

What if he forces himself on me again!? What if he hurts me? I need to get out of here.

My breathing picks up and I still my movements, frantically trying to come up with a way to get free. My chest heaves and my nerves are electrified. I'm prey, frozen and waiting for the next shift from my predator before I run.

But then it happens.

An arrogant gratification pours off of Draco as our breathing synchronizes, becoming slow and steady. A warm sense of peace enrobes me. I fill my lungs, then let the fear wash away as our bond aligns and hums.

"There you go," he gloats, knowing his proximity has power over me. "Now, you've been gone for almost a year. The Dark Lord's followers are starting to notice. So you're coming back with me. That isn't up for discussion. We need to prove that I still have you under control."

I blink, taking in what he's said while focusing on the weight of his hand in my hair. It's both anxiety-producing and comforting.

I need to calm down and take this one step at a time. If we're going to try to kill Voldemort and save the Order, then Draco is right. We can't let the evil Bastard get too suspicious. I've been gone for ten months. Of course, people might notice.

How has Draco explained my absence?

"Do you understand me?"

The pressure of his broad frame against my back subdues me. I close my eyes, take in his delicious smell, and try to imagine that he's *my* Draco. We're standing here together in a warm embrace.

After a few more steadying breaths, I give in. I can't stay here wallowing in my sadness forever. I need to do what I came here to do. I need to finish what I started so that everything was worth destroying my relationship.

"Draco —" I hate how pathetic I sound. Feeling defeated and vulnerable, I admit, "— please. I can't go live at the Manor—not after what happened." I drop my eyes to my scar as I beg him to understand.

He presses against me as he shifts, placing his forehead on the back of my head and saying into my curls, "I've had to walk through that atrium every day for the past seven years. Don't tell me that it's too hard to stomach. I'm exceptionally aware of that torture."

He slides his hand down my arm, locking my wrist in his grasp and preventing me from drawing my wand. Then he turns on the spot, dragging me back to the first home I ever shared with him.

"Get changed. We have company joining us for dinner. Your dress is in the closet."

Draco barks orders, leaving me pressed to the wall in our former bedroom. He sounds guarded again as if I can hear him pull on his mask of self-protection — the one he so often employs.

I'm leaning into the thick molding, scrunching my eyes shut. I haven't moved yet because I don't want to face what's to come. If I don't open my eyes, I can continue imagining this isn't happening.

"You know what to do," he says, then steps into the hall.

When he's gone, I let out a sigh of relief and then slink to the closet to see what he meant. Inside I find all my old clothes. I see the sundress I wore when riding Draco's cock in the library one afternoon. I remember how the strap fell down my left arm with the exertion and exposed my breast. I shudder thinking about how wanton I was with my head tilted back in ecstasy and my shaking arms wrapped around his neck.

A few hangers down, I see my silk bathrobe, and then another cloud of memories overtakes me as I recall countless nights wearing nothing but that robe while sitting in his lap by the window. Draco would run his hand under the seam, then coax me to turn and face the wall before pulling himself free to lodge in my core, or often he would suck on my neck, whispering sinful praises into my ear while pulling an orgasm from me.

"Fuck you look perfect, biting your bottom lip as I finger your pussy."

I scowl. Draco certainly didn't suffer *too* much after I left in 1998.

Shaking my head, I narrow my eyes at the clothing. I was so ignorant of the twisted world in which I lived. These outfits are a time capsule of my world before I found my note in *Hogwarts a History* and became who I am.

I grump, lost in my thoughts, running my fingers along the hanging fabrics before everything screeches to a halt.

Hanging on the back of the door is the gray dress. The one he forced me to wear to the revel.

My arms start to itch, and my head swims as I try to remain calm. Draco said I would know what to do. He said that company was coming over.

Oh gods, what's going to happen tonight?!

Thirty minutes later, I'm a mess. Draco comes to collect me and discovers that I'm in the closet, slumped down on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest. I haven't been able to move, and instead, I have worn a groove into the rug beneath me as I dug my fingers into the pile repeatedly.

"You aren't dressed," he states the obvious as he looms over me.

I bite my nails, bracing myself for what's to come. Draco crouches to my eye level when I don't respond, then reaches out his hand.

But I flinch away.

"What's going to happen tonight?" I cry. I've lost all sense of self-respect and am now a puddle of fear and anxiety.

"We are entertaining guests."

"Who's coming?"

My nerves are fried, and I despise how my voice wavers, but I'm scared. I can't believe that I *chose* this path for myself.

I lift my watery eyes to him, imploring him not to hurt me. I can't take it. I can't go through another night like the revel.

"Some Death Eaters—old mates of mine who are pretending that they want to knock about, but it's obvious that they're coming to check in on me." He scans my features, then adds, "I'm sure they'd love to report anything suspicious to Voldemort as far as you're concerned. They've been asking a lot of questions about you lately."

Drawing upon my courage, I point a finger at him, spitting, "You are not going to assault me again, you Bastard!"

A haunted shadow lurks behind Draco's gaze when he takes in my ire. He looks momentarily shaken—grief-stricken. So, I readjust myself to sit up taller and try to look authoritative. Then I watch as anger narrows Draco's eyes. He's warring with himself, caught in some unspoken battle. As I stand firm in my convictions, he clears his throat, rubbing the back of his neck and promising, "I'm not going to touch you." His voice lowers. "No one will." He pushes my finger out of his face and then brushes my hair behind my ears. "I won't let you get hurt again."

We stare at one another for a long stretch while I try to process what's going on. Who is *this* Draco? What really motivates him? I can't make sense of it.

Draco stands and brushes off his pants as I scrutinize his features, adding, "You're going to sit at my side, eat your food, and keep your mouth shut unless *I* ask you a direct question." I dry my eyes on my sleeve while listening to him. "The men are bringing their witches as well. You'll probably be subjected to vile conversation, but that will be it."

"Okay," I whisper, picking at my nails.

Draco lifts his brows and tilts his head, confirming, "Okay?"

I meet his gaze and then offer a tiny nod of understanding. If that's all that happens, then I can stomach it. I know we need to curb suspicions. I don't want to think about how horrible it would be to be brought back to Voldemort again for questioning.

"As long as you don't touch me."

"Get dressed," he barks, then storms out the door.

Chapter 31: Confusion

Chapter Summary

I hate you, I love you
I hate that I love you
Don't want to, but I can't put nobody else above you
I hate you, I love you
I hate that I want you
You want her, you need her
And I'll never be her
-I hate u, I love u, Gnash

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning
Attempted assault

I want to mention again that from here on out we will be bouncing back and forth between the past and the future with nearly each chapter. That may be confusing. If it's too hard to remember each storyline you should be able to wait and read them sequentially. However, I wrote them this way to reveal details the way I thought was the most entertaining. And let's be honest, this is a piece about time travel so sequential has been out the window for a long time!

Happy reading!

June 1998

As we reach my bedroom door, the tension between us becomes thick. Draco admitted he's grieving, but now neither of us knows what to say. I can't tell if I should give him some space or invite him to read to me more. A draw urges me to spend as much time as possible with him, but I'm unsure.

I place my hand on the knob as Draco breaks the silence.

"Would you —?"

"Yes?" I'm eager to hear what he has to say. Spending more time alone isn't ideal.

He places his hands in his pockets, looking like he's still deciding what to do next. "It's early. Would you like to see the gardens now? They're lovely at night."

This is good. I'm not tired yet anyway, and maybe I can get him to tell me more about myself and our relationship. I know I should take things slowly, but I have this ferocious drive to learn as much as possible. Plus, if he tells me more, it might jog my memory.

"I'd like that."

I smile at him, and his shoulders relax in response. The moment is tender. Neither of us knows how to behave around one another, but we both want to figure it out.

Would he let me hold his hand? What would that feel like? Would it make things weirder?

Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I say, "Let me just grab something warmer."

I don't know where those impulses came from. I'm not ready for that yet.

Draco offers a slight nod, so I turn to fetch something out of my closet.

He follows me into the room and waits by the door as I grab a robe. Satisfied, I pull it on and walk to meet him. He turns and holds the door out for me, but as soon as I pass under his arm, I stop in my tracks, hearing a woman's voice call out from downstairs.

"Draco darling, are you home?"

The air shifts as Draco juts his hand out, cuffing my wrist.

He's been careful not to touch me since noticing my discomfort after I woke up, so the behavior change sends a chill up my spine.

"Sorry, love, this will need to wait."

He sounds different as he clicks the bedroom door shut. He's worried about something. I turn to face him, but he steps around me and pulls me back into the bedroom.

"What? Why?" I ask.

"We have some guests that I need to entertain. I'll show you the grounds another time, okay?" He bends to catch my eye, trying to look carefree, but I can tell something's up. "Here, you take the Dreamless Sleep and I will come by again in the morning."

Pulling the potion out of his pocket, he shoves the phial into my hand as I stumble backward. I don't grab it.

"Who's here?"

"No one, Hermione, just a neighbor."

That is complete bullshit. Anger starts to creep up the back of my neck. I don't understand what changed and why he wants me out of the way. Who is he afraid of me meeting, and why?

I purse my lips and raise one eyebrow. "A neighbor who calls you darling?"

Draco slows his anxious movements and stands to his full height, towering over me. In response, I stare up at him, dragging my eyes from his torso to his clenched jaw. I'm only as tall as his shoulder, and he's nearly double my width. I hadn't realized that until now. The room seems to cool in the following silence, so I rub my hands up and down my arms to combat the chill.

"Draco?" The woman calls again. Her quiet voice tells me she is likely waiting by the front door.

How long would it take me to get there?

I scan the room in my nervousness, stopping on the full tin of Floo powder on the fireplace mantel. Draco follows my gaze, then shoves his hands in his pocket, staring down at me.

"Alright, the woman you hear is my Mother."

My eyebrows raise into my hairline. I just started getting used to Draco. I'm not ready to add more of his family members.

Draco catches the change in my mood. "That's what I thought." He motions toward the bed, and I follow his directive. "You aren't ready for visitors." Shaking the phial in mid-air to draw my attention back to it, he then places it in my hand. "Here, take the potion. I'll come collect you in the morning."

I clutch the bottle as he lifts me into the air and deposits me on the mattress. Then he steps back, waiting for me to drink.

"Where's my Mother?"

"Hermione —" he scowls, placating me. I don't have time right now, but I'll answer all of your questions tomorrow, okay?"

"Do I have siblings?"

He takes the potion out of my open palm and pops the cork, then hands it back.

"Tomorrow."

"Okay," I whisper, staring at the potion. I'm keyed up now and might need to calm down before falling asleep again. I haven't been up that long, anyway. But when I raise my gaze to argue, I pale at Draco's stern expression.

"Is it safe?" I wince. The arrival of Draco's mom intensifies my desperate confusion.

"You know it is," he sighs, lifting his gaze to the bedroom door and back. "I proved that yesterday with the truth serum."

Tears well up in my eyes, and my breathing flutters in my chest. I drop my head and rub my fingers together on the bedspread. "Please, Draco, would you do it again?"

A long, tense silence passes between us before he responds. In the distance, I hear his mother call for him again, "Draco?" but the heavy bedroom door muffles her voice.

He rubs the back of his neck and shifts his jaw, looking like he wants to deny my request, so I try one last time. "Please."

Draco lets out another heavy breath through his nose, then marches toward the hallway, opens the door, and calls for Millie. When she arrives, he orders, "Tell them that I'll be down in a moment."

Next, he returns, picks up the bottle of Veritaserum still sitting on the desk from last night, and takes a sip.

I feel some of the tension leave my shoulders as he humors me. Sitting taller, I ask, "Is the sleeping potion safe?"

"Yes."

Mollified, I take a sip as the muscles in my neck loosen.

Draco's face smooths and warms. "Thank you,"

He tilts his head up, directing me to lay down on the pillow, and I do as he directs.

He's right to be protective. I don't feel up to meeting new people. I'm barely holding it together. I'll get a good night's sleep and then make him answer my questions in the morning.

I watch him walk into the hall through my heavy lids and drift off as he closes the door behind him.

Hours later, the bed dips, startling me awake.

It's late. All the candles are out, and the room is dark. Everything feels fuzzy. My heart starts thumping against my chest as I attempt to wipe the sleep from my brain and take in my surroundings. It's hard to get my bearings straight with the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

Then I hear a sinister voice.

"Potter's Mudblood."

A chill slithers up my spine in response.

"The Dark Lord's Seer."

"Who are you!?" I scramble to sit up, grabbing the sheets to my chest and crying out in fear.

My potion-addled, sluggish mind refuses to clear. However, as I rub my eyes, I notice that the man beside me looks familiar. I squint through the darkness and register that he looks like Draco, only older and with much longer hair.

He brushes off his sleeves and curls his lips. "I see you survived a month of interrogation. Tell me, was the Dark Lord gentle with you?" The man sounds like an aristocrat, but the way he reaches forward and glides the back of his hand down the side of my face screams danger.

"Don't fucking touch me!" I spit, slapping his hand away and throwing back the covers to jump out of bed. However, before my feet hit the ground, he shoots out his large hand to cuff my throat.

I grasp at his vice-like grip, trying to pull his fingers from me as the man throws me backwards. Then, he leans forward with violent malice in his burning eyes. "You. do not. tell me who or what I can touch in my own home." As my ears ring with danger, he uses his other hand to push my nightgown up my thighs, inching towards my sex. Panicked, I slap at the bedside table in search of my wand. My eyes are watering, and I feel electrified with fear—his tight hold around my neck aches. The iron taste of blood coats my throat.

My nerves singe with fear at the same time that there's a loud *Crack!* and then the air rushes back into my lungs.

In the chaos, I gasp while pinpricks of light dot my vision. I almost miss the spell flashing across the room. It hits the man in the chest, causing him to fall to the ground.

My throat burns. That man is dangerous! Oh gods, oh gods!!

I'm hysterical, running my hands over my abused neck to ensure his grasp on me is gone.

"What the hell was —" I scream.

But Draco ignores me as he crashes across the room to loom over the prone man with his wand to his neck. His chest heaves in anger as he snarls, "Father, do you understand your orders or do you need reminding?"

"Father!?" I sputter, hunched over in pain. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Hermione, get to my room. I'll be with you shortly," Draco orders without taking his eyes off the older man.

"But?"

"Now!"

I haven't seen Draco like this before. His face is contorted with fury, and he's pulsing with energy. One look at the standoff between the two of them tells me that I don't want to be in the middle of this altercation. That man choked me. This isn't safe!

I nod and stumble out of the room, heading down the hall as my fuzzy head spins. However, then I pause when I hear them yelling. I can't help myself. A morbid curiosity drives me to

cower behind the door, watching what happens next through the crack in the wood.

The horrible man hasn't moved yet. Instead, he shoots daggers at Draco from his place on the ground.

"How dare you, boy!" he winces, clutching at his chest where Draco's spell hit him. "I'll have your head for hexing me like this, you wretched little shit!"

Draco is stone—volatile and unmoving. "Keep your hands off of her!" His voice is quiet and cold, sending another chill up my spine. He has been nothing but kind since I arrived, but now I hardly recognize him for the authority he wields.

The man lunges for his wand, which lies on the floor a few feet away, but Draco beats him to it. He kicks the wood away and stands on his wrist, crushing the old man to the ground.

Then, the furious assailant sneers, "You're obviously having fun with her too. She's in your bed." He tries to push up on his elbows to gain some respect. "You sullied my house, letting that filth soil your sheets?! I'll—"

He doesn't get a chance to finish his scathing reprimand because Draco flicks his wand, bulging his eyes as he clutches at his throat.

"This is no longer your home. I've outranked you for months now. The Dark Lord gave me the job, not you!" Draco leans down, forcing the choking man to look at him. When he speaks, I sense a clawing fury in my chest. I raise my hand and drop my eyes, considering the sensation, then hear him spit, "You're no longer the head of this family. You're a pathetic, disappointing failure!"

The older man roars, pushing Draco in an effort to stand. He reaches for his wand again, yelling, "The second you're not looking I'm going to watch the light leave that Mudblood bitch's eyes." He swipes his hair out of his face, then sneers, "—right after I rip her cunt to shreds!"

I throw my hands to my mouth to cover the strangled whimper that escapes my throat at the sound of this man's monstrous threat. I'm frozen with fear—every muscle in my body tenses.

"We'll see how long you outrank me when your fucking pet project is dead!!"

There's a loud *Crash!* and a *Thump!* as the two men scramble for the upper hand. Draco prevails. He violently fists the man's collar and points his wand in his face. I scrunch my eyes shut as a flash of green light shoots out from under the door, startling me into motion again. I run to Draco's bedroom and slam the door open, barricading myself in and pressing my ear to the wood to catch what's happening. Then, I struggle to catch my breath in the chilling silence.

My heart hammers in my chest as I jolt awake again.

I throw back the covers and curl into a ball at the headboard, staring at the end of the bed. In the inky blackness, I clutch at my throat from the memory of being attacked. I shift back and forth to get the blanket off of me and run my hands over my body, checking for any signs of injury.

Shit! Gods!

I furrow my brows and dart my eyes around the room, verifying whether or not I need to run. After a few breaths, I notice that even though the room is dark, I can make out the shapes from the little light offered by the night sky.

Squinting, I take in my surroundings.

I'm not in Draco's room. I'm in my room. No one else is here, and the house is quiet.

I run my shaky hand through my hair, trying to calm my racing heart as I listen to the deafening silence. My nerves are fried. It feels like I'm going full speed and slamming into a brick wall. The whiplash from fear to stillness is awful.

What was that!? Everything felt so real. Oh gods!

My skin crawls as I fidget, trying to shake the last vestiges of the nightmare from my thoughts. I want to be brave. I'm a grown-ass witch! But I'm terrified.

Not knowing what else to do, I yell, "Draco!"

In a matter of seconds, he's at my door.

"Hermione? What is it?" He's shirtless and wearing sleep trunks. His hair is askew, indicating I've woken him from a deep sleep.

When he catches me cowering in my bed, he stomps through the room and then crouches to my eye level to put me at ease. He's careful not to touch me as he soothes, "Are you okay? What is it?"

I swipe away tears from my cheeks, furious that I'm crying again. I hate this! I hate feeling so weak and afraid all the time!

"Your father!" I hiccup. How can he ask me that after what just went down!?

Draco looks cagey for a moment before tilting his head in confusion. He hasn't said anything yet. I shake away the thought that he's trying too hard to look sincere. My muddled brain is playing tricks on me in the dark.

"He attacked me!"

His eyebrows raise, and after a moment, a realization hits him, so he furrows his brows in pity.

My skin prickles as I take a few deep breaths. Draco is calm and quiet. He looks unphased, except that he's worried about my distress. For a brief moment, I catch a depth to his gaze that hints towards a cool calculation on his part, but then, in an instant, it's gone.

"Love, you had a nightmare."

No, that doesn't feel right. I know it was real!

I start to object, but Draco continues, "My Father died years ago." He places his hand on the bed near my foot.

What? But...

I dart my unfocused eyes around the room for another minute looking for any sign that what I just experienced was real. But I come up empty. The room is still, and everything is in its place.

I take several more steadying breaths, then shake the trauma out of my head and clasp my trembling hands in my lap. Having Draco close helps my raging emotions slow. I take one last deep breath and then drop my gaze to my hands. Maybe I'm not sure what I saw.

"Everything's okay. You're safe," Draco soothes.

"It felt so real."

"I'm sure it did. Sleep potions aren't a good match with the stress you've been under. I should've realized. I'm sorry." He stands and summons a glass of water, hands it to me, and then sits on the edge of the bed.

"He looked just like you," I say, trying to resolve my confusion.

"Hermione—" he's pitying me. This is awful. "You've seen his portrait all over the Manor. It probably crept into your subconscious."

I take the glass from him but scowl. How he's sitting looks like how I found the man in my dream — or whatever it was.

The cup shakes as I tilt it to my lips, but the cool water tastes sweet and refreshing. While I drink, I stare at the fireplace's empty mantel.

Didn't there used to be something there? My mind is playing tricks on me in more ways than one.

As my heart rate slows, details of the event begin to slip away from me like fading memories.

"You swear nothing happened?" I say into the cup, then pause, waiting for him to respond.

"Nothing happened, Hermione. You fell asleep and I entertained my mother for an hour or two before heading to bed myself. I promise, you've been sleeping soundly all evening."

I let the room's silence comfort me and take a sip, feeling foolish. Calling out for Draco because I had a bad dream warms my cheeks. I run my hands over my hair and shift my legs under the covers.

Then I huff out a tired joke, trying to release the tension. "I thought you gave me a *Dreamless* Sleep."

His kind, knowing eyes make me feel both safe and frustrated. I wish I weren't such a nutcase! I can't remember anything, and now I'm afraid of my own shadow.

"I'm sorry I woke you. You can go back to bed." I mumble the apology, knowing full well that if he leaves, I won't be able to fall back asleep.

"Shh." He guides me back to the pillow and pulls the bedspread over my shoulders. "Close your eyes, love. You're okay." He clears his throat. "I'm here with you."

"You'll stay?"

Draco's voice wavers as he says, "Of course I will." He reaches to brush my hair out of my eyes but then catches himself. I sense his need to hold me. "I won't let anything happen to you." He sounds determined as if he is talking to both of us. "You're safe."

Days later, I push open a bedroom door and feel a quick rush of familiarity. There is something about this space. It's soothing.

The past two weeks here have been...

Good?

Confusing?

...exciting?

No, Hermione, nothing is exciting about your situation.

I've lost all recollection of who I was. I don't even know whether I like Fizzing Whizzbies or Peppermint Toads or shit! — I don't know my middle name!

My eyes blow wide at that realization, but I am determined not to let it throw me too much. I'll ask Draco later.

There have been several times where the grief has felt overwhelming— times I've spent staring out the window, trying to remember, and hating the fact that I can't.

But then there's the other times.

Being here with Draco is going okay. I mean, honestly, isn't it everyone's dream to wake up married to an extremely attractive billionaire? That, and he's insufferable in his calm, devoted attention. He's always nearby, willing to care for me or give me space, depending on my needs.

And he smells so damn good.

A shiver runs up my back as I picture his muscular build and exquisite attention to an effortless fashion. He always looks like he walked straight out of Witch Weekly.

Sighing, I realize, the light here is warm and inviting. I'm on the third floor, exploring. I happened upon this room as if drawn by a siren's call.

I cross in front of a queen-size, four-poster bed to sit in the plush chair by the window, then close my eyes and take a deep breath. I don't know how, but I know this room is important.

I should ask Draco. Maybe this intuition is a sign of my memories returning!

However, Draco always seems to bristle when I ask him about the past. He doesn't like me to see how sad he is most of the time. I think he doesn't want to hurt my feelings. Shadows cross his features when I ask about specific details, and he is quick to caution me that if I try to force the memories to the forefront of my mind, I may fall back into my coma.

My skin itches thinking about what it would be like to wake up with even less of myself!

Rubbing my hands over the armrests and considering my complex circumstances, I wish life were easier.

"Here you are."

Draco's smooth voice draws my attention to where he leans against the doorframe, scanning the room. I'm not surprised that he sought me out.

"Draco?"

He raises his eyebrows, waiting for me to continue.

"Do I paint?"

Shifting his weight and rubbing the back of his neck, he evades my question.

"Do you want to paint?"

"Maybe. But do I?"

"Why do you ask?"

I raise one eyebrow and drag my lips to the side. Isn't it obvious?

"I was thinking of spending some more time up here. I like this room. I thought maybe I could do a hobby or something."

"I'll get you some supplies," he says flatly, staring at his shoes.

"No, I mean, I need to have something to do with my nervous energy. Did I enjoy anything other than reading?" I press him for answers. "You said I shouldn't read, so what else is there for me to do?"

He lifts his gaze, considering me with a new curiosity. Draco starts, "You could —" he stops himself, looking like this suggestion is weightier than I realize. For a second, I get the sense that he might not continue, but then I feel him throwing caution to the wind. "You could play music."

"Really? What do I play? Am I any good? That would be great!" In my excitement I decide to take a risk as well. I sit back and blurt out, "Did something happen up here?"

Draco freezes.

He tries so hard to hide his tells, but I'm eerily in tune with his emotions. It's as if I literally feel them in my bones.

Then he takes a deep breath and puffs his cheeks as he blows it out again. "This room?" He looks around like he's never seen the place. "No, sorry."

I slump into the chair and pick at my nails. That doesn't feel right, but why would Draco lie?

"Stay here, I'll be right back."

He's gone for a few minutes, which gives me enough time to think. I slow my breathing, steady my heart, and dip into the magic of this space. I know something happened here. Maybe it was a fight, and Draco doesn't want to tell me yet? I'll get it out of him later. He needs to be open and honest with me if we're married. Otherwise, this isn't going to work!

When he returns, Draco says, "Here you go," and then he holds out an exquisite violin for me.

I hop up from the chair and cross the room to meet him. Pushing my ponytail behind my shoulder, I take the instrument from him. Then, I run my fingers over the wood and marvel at its beauty.

Lifting my gaze, I ask, "You play too?" as Draco sets another larger violin on the bed and conjures a music stand.

"Yes, in fact we loved to play together. It was one of the ways that we first connected."

I smile. Draco is telling me more than he has in several days. This is good.

Eager, to see where this goes, I stand straighter and ask, "Okay, what do I do with it?" while inspecting the instrument again.

I understand the basics, but I have no idea about the technique. I pull the violin onto my shoulder and look back for approval.

"Not like that. Here," Draco adjusts my posture to align my chin with the rest, and I hold my arms straight. "Try that," he says with great anticipation. I can tell he's looking forward to

playing together again. It's an easy way for us to spend time together without the need for talking, which he sometimes finds difficult.

"You're going to be very surprised. You're a bit of a virtuoso."

Draco's smile looks hopeful, which causes my stomach to flutter in anticipation.

I shift my weight and grasp the wood tighter, letting out a contented sigh. Being good at something sounds like a welcome break from the lost and anxious witch I've been.

Determined, I place the bow on the strings and slide it down —producing an ear-splitting screech!

I wince as the noise reverberates around the room and echoes in my ears for several seconds longer than I played. Then Draco pulls back, frowning. He stares at me briefly before saying, "It's okay, try again."

I attempt another note and receive the same result. Draco's brows fall, so I shake out my hand, throw the violin back on my shoulder, and steady myself with determination.

Come on, Hermione, you can do this! Find the skills. They're there!

Again, I try, and as soon as the note wails, I feel a rush of frustration. Dejected, I hunch my shoulders as my chest weighs down with grief.

I lost my ability to play as well.

Looking shocked now, Draco darts his eyes between me and the violin. His mind is moving furiously, trying to understand what's happening. My stomach drops. He must not have realized yet that I really can't play.

However, he surprises me when a sudden look of overwhelming relief takes over his expression. He laughs, rubbing his forehead, "Listen, Hermione, you don't need to pretend. There's no point. In fact, I'm looking forward to playing together."

Why would he think I'm pretending? What would be the purpose of that!?

I drop the instrument to my side and then hand it back. "I don't remember. Just like everything else in my life." Then I stomp away.

I hate feeling like I fail at everything!

He doesn't stop me right away. I can feel Draco's frustration in the air between us. He probably thinks I'm being petulant. I'm not playing games, though. I'm embarrassed and need some space. Sometimes, I wish he wouldn't hover so much.

I almost reach the hall before he calls to me, "Hermione, wait."

I pause but don't turn to face him. Staring into the dark corridor, I ache with sadness. For a second, I thought I would learn something about myself—that I'd do something to inspire Draco's proud smile.

His footsteps approach, and with one hand on my forearm, he turns me to face him.

"Don't suffer alone. It's okay." Then, he cups my jaw and rubs his thumb over my cheek. "I'll teach you," his voice is smooth and velvety even though he looks wrecked with sadness, too.

Merlin, this man is so thoughtful and generous. He's almost too good to be true. And here I am, a stupid, useless shell of my former self.

I don't respond but hope he can sense my unspoken appreciation as I lean into his palm.

His touch feels right and good. I want to melt into his embrace. I've been so scared to let him touch me, but it's a salve. I savor the feeling, hoping to draw some sense of who I was from it.

Draco's heated gaze causes me to forget about music and rooms when I open my eyes. He's looking at me with intense, pulsing desire. My core tingles in response, and my legs go weak.

Gods, he's so hot.

The moment stretches on as neither of us wants to move.

After a beat of silence, he asks, "Can I kiss you?"

My ears grow hot, and my cheeks warm. Am I ready for that? I wish I were, but my emotions crash around inside of me. My chest tightens as I avoid his eyes. I can't add a sexual relationship to the balance that I'm already trying to sort out.

I take a deep breath, meet his vulnerable, scorching gaze again, and let him down as kindly as possible.

"No, sorry."

There it is. I shattered the delicious tension.

His shoulders drop, and he offers a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. Then he rolls his lips and nods his understanding.

Damn it! Why can't I just make life easy? I obviously feel the intense connection between us. Why can't I just give in to it?

I fidget, frustrated with myself, and then a thought occurs. Maybe if I could see what it was like to love and be loved by this man, I would feel comfortable giving myself to him!

"Wait! Can I see your memories of our past relationship?"

I'm sure that, with his wealth, he has a Penisive. I can't believe I never thought to ask before now. This could be a game-changer for us. It might even speed up my recovery!

I brush my hair out of my eyes and tuck it behind my ears, leaning forward on my toes to catch his gaze.

But my face falls when I take in his pained expression.

"No, sorry."

Draco sounds tormented as if he wishes he could give me what I want but can't.

However, the sudden letdown hurts me. Vexed, I shift my weight and cross my arms.

"Would you have said yes if I kissed you?" I snap.

Shifting back, Draco darkens his eyes, and I sense anger clawing at his insides. I struck a nerve.

"No, Hermione! It's not about that." He leaves me at the door to pace in the center of the room. "You can take all the time you need," he says holding out an open palm to me. Then he

pauses. "Of course, you can. Haven't I proven that I respect your wishes?"

His sudden anger is startling—and kind of hot. He's gentle and accommodating to a fault, but seeing his hackles raised over protecting my right to autonomy is fascinating.

"Yes, you've proven that." I concede, shuffling my feet. "I'm sorry. I'd like it if you would teach me to play. That would be nice."

Draco runs his hands through his hair and attempts to calm himself down. But he isn't successful. I've really pushed him. He shifts his jaw back and forth while staring at me, then walks past me into the hall. "Not right now. We can do it another time. I need a minute."

I spend another hour sitting in the room on the third floor, processing what just happened. I shouldn't have snapped at Draco like that. What I was really mad about was not being able to play music like he thought I could. I thought I would tap into my former self for a brief moment, but again, I failed. I hate failure.

I chew my nails, curl up in the chair, and then huff, deciding to find Draco and apologize again. It was nasty of me to accuse him the way I did.

Determined to apologize, I scour the halls, ducking my head into his room, the library, and out of the windows to check the gardens, but I come up empty. With no other options, I search for Millie, hoping she might know where he went. As far as I know, he hasn't left the Manor since I woke up here. However, I don't find her either.

I'm about to give up when I notice the door to Draco's office is closed. I step closer to investigate but find it locked. Just as I decide to leave, I rub my ears, recognizing a buzzing, which causes me to do a double-take.

Someone cast a Muffliato.

I may not remember anything about my past, but magic has never evaded me. So, unable to stop myself, I press my ear to the wood.

"I can't do this anymore! I can't take it!"

Draco's voice is muffled but I can make out his yelling if I listen very closely.

"I'm trying to hold it all in—to be the best I can, and she still hates me! She barely tolerates my presence, and don't get me started about her fucking safety here!"

There's a crash! Then I hear Millie's higher pitch.

"Yous are doing so well, Master Draco. Yous are kind, and noble."

"Six years! How could she ask that of me!?"

Six years? Who is 'she,' and what did she ask him to do? I thought he was talking about me, but that doesn't fit. Why is he worried about that now?

My mind races as I continue listening.

"Everything is fixed, she said, Sir. Yous know what you need to do."

There's a pause, and then I must strain hard to hear because Draco drops his voice, growling, "I told you. I'm not doing that."

Doing what? Safety? What is he talking about?! My skin starts to crawl. Why does it feel like Draco leads a double life? I want to know why the hell he was so triggered by my comment and what he's talking about now.

He's going to stop deflecting and give me some real goddamned answers!

"Sir?"

"What!"

Millie's voice lowers, too, so I smash my ear to the wood, desperate for more information.

"...outside...door.."

I scrunch my eyes and lean even harder on the door, trying to hear. Then, before I know it, I tumble forward as the door swings open. I fall to the ground, scrambling to right myself, but there's no hiding what I was doing.

"Hey, are you okay?" Draco clears his throat and crouches to help me up. He's trying to come off as calm and collected, but I know what I just heard.

So, I shoot into action. "What the hell is going on?" I snarl, brushing his hand away. "Why are you so upset? What are you yelling about?" I push my hair out of my eyes as I attempt to stand, ready to pounce. Draco just offers an arrogant frown, staring at me. "I need more answers, and I need them, now!" He stands, crosses his arms, and shifts his weight to one leg. "Like, what really happened to me? How the fuck did I end up like this?"

Draco half laughs, half roars at Millie while pointing at me with an open hand, raising his eyebrows to his hairline in incredulity.

"Well, that took two fucking weeks!!"

Chapter 32: Dine & Dash

Chapter Summary

"Oh, we'd face it all
But our pieces fall
Can we give this pain to somebody else
Or when it hurts to love is it better to end?
And we fought so hard
But we've grown apart
Can we hold it all together in pain
Or when it hurts to love is it better to break?
I'm falling to pieces now"
-Here it is, Cian Ducrot

Chapter Notes

Okay.... I'm too excited to get these chapters out. I promise not to let it go more than a week without a chapter until the end, but I'm loving the comments and to keep them up I might drop sooner. =) Happy reading!

Your comments and Kudos are so appreciated!

May 2005

My bare feet slap against the stone tile floors as I follow in Draco's wake, running my hands down my dress to straighten my clothes. But, fuming, I drop my hands to my sides when I catch myself.

What am I doing? Do I really need to be wrinkle-free for this dinner? Am I trying to be a presentable captive?

As we walk through the formal arcade underneath the marble columns headed to the dining room, I continue chastising myself. The cotton fabric of my dress is tight around my chest. It

leaves very little room for the imagination, showing off my curves despite the uniform's homeliness. The skirt, however, sways as I walk. It isn't tight at all but instead offers easy access for anyone interested in forcing their way under the pleats.

How clever of these Death Eaters.

Scowling, I observe that the last time I wore this outfit, I wasn't coherent enough to reflect on its usefulness.

As we reach the wavy glass French doors leading to the dining room, Draco doesn't stop. Instead, he ignores my presence, offering his guests a curt but effective greeting.

"Zabini, Nott," he says with a quick dip of his forehead when we enter.

The taller of the two men smiles arrogantly, "Evening, Sir. It's been a while since we've been to the Manor. How gracious of you to invite us."

Draco's irritation claws at him as I take in the other two people in the room. I try not to draw too much attention, scanning the features of the other witches who, like me, await direction while the men shake hands and make small talk.

The woman with the taller wizard has braids and a deep, beautiful ebony complexion; the other witch has olive skin marred by a bruised cheekbone. She's trying to cover her face with her long, carmel-colored locks. They're both cowering behind the rapists that brought them here, trying to become invisible.

"Potter's Mudblood looks well."

The use of my awful moniker draws my attention.

"You've kept her hidden for so long, Drake— I almost forgot what she looked like."

The shorter Death Eater leers at me, but of course, he isn't addressing me directly. My skin crawls as he rakes his eyes over my body without a hint of shame.

"She hasn't been *Potter's* Mudblood for years, Zabini," Draco drawls, reaching out his arm to push me behind him. He directs me to stand like the other two witches—one step behind and one step to the left of their wizards. "She is properly mine to do with as I please." He tilts his gaze over his shoulder, sneering at me. Then, disgusted, Draco drops his hand and snaps his fingers, pointing at the floor.

I grind my teeth, seething, but follow his order, dropping my head to stare at the stone tile.

"—and what pleases me is to keep her locked in my room most of the time," Draco finishes as my stomach churns.

The two guests share a dark laugh before the wizard, that Draco calls Zabini, agrees, "Yes, I see the appeal."

The man, who must be Nott, then fists the back of his captive's neck and drags her forward. He holds her in front of him, sliding his hand down her chest. "I like mine with me." The woman offers a frightened moan that sets fire to my nerves as he talks. I lift my head to see what's going on and experience an intense desire to bolt upstairs and grab my wand. I want to hex this pig.

Draco flicks his hand again, noticing my anger and reminding me where my eyes belong. I try to keep my blood from boiling as Nott continues.

"You never know when you might need to expend some energy—our jobs being so stressful and all."

My vision shakes as I try not to make a scene. I'd rather be anywhere than here. These men are disgusting, and the sight of the abused women in their midst makes me nauseous.

I hate this! I hate these vile men. I hate my circumstances. I hate this fucking war!

My only solace is knowing that their time is almost up. I came back to 2005 to put an end to this dystopia. Draco agreed to help me. He may still be a horrible and violent shell of his former self, but he swore that he would help me if I came back.

"—*to his bed*," is what he technically said, but I won't think about that now.

I close my eyes and imagine myself murdering Voldemort and then starting in on men like these two.

Draco waves his open palm to the table, inviting the men to sit.

"Yes, your life is so stressful managing the treasury, Nott. Give me a break."

Zabini guffaws as the two men approach the table to take their seats. Then, I follow Draco to the head of the table while keeping an eye out for what is expected of me. Before he sits, he places his hand on the seat to his left, indicating my designated chair, but he's careful not to seem too obvious. With nothing else to do but continue to pretend to be a submissive little slave, I pull out the chair and sit. As I scoot up to the table, Nott hurries to take the seat to Draco's right. Zabini pulls out the chair beside me but stops when he receives a dangerous look from Draco. Then he mumbles, "Of course, sorry, I wasn't thinking," as he moves down a chair, placing his witch beside me instead.

The men clamor on, downing one drink after another as we eat. Draco is in a foul mood but joins in the conversation with curt responses. I'm disgusted by the entire situation. So, I keep my eyes on my plate for the most part. That's what the other women are doing, and I'd like to avoid drawing any more attention—especially as the men become more inebriated. While I eat, I chance looks in Draco's direction, trying again to reconcile this man with who he used to be. His features and mannerisms are the same, but there is something new about the air of authority he exudes. He seems more stern—tired.

Even though the elves made delicious food, it tastes like ash. I'm too overwhelmed with the evening's events to enjoy a meal.

The various courses appear on the table out of thin air. This is clearly not the type of dinner where elves are meant to be seen. However, after about an hour, Zabini reaches for a bottle of wine and clumsily bumps into the arm of the woman sitting between us, causing him to knock over his glass. Embarrassed, he snarls at the woman, "Bitch, you got in my way!"

Draco rolls his eyes. Then, instead of deigning to clean up a mess himself—even with the help of magic—he calls for Millie.

When she scurries through the door, my stomach drops further. Her bright dress and jumper are gone; instead, she's wearing a thin tea towel.

I guess Draco and I aren't the only ones pretending.

In the chaos of cleaning up the spilled wine, the woman next to me starts crying. She's sitting ramrod straight and doesn't make a scene, but I see the fear in her eyes and the water on her cheek. Zabini seems drunk and violent—happy to blame her for his mistakes. Feeling for her, I drop my arm below the table and grab her hand. It shakes in my palm. Then, I try to let her know she isn't alone by squeezing her fingers. Neither of us moves our eyes from our plates. But after a moment, she squeezes back hard, like she's grabbing onto a lifeline.

A second later, Draco clutches my thigh under the table. I shift to look at him, curious as to why he is grabbing me so hard, but then I see his dark, pointed gaze. I drop the woman's hand and continue eating at his crude demand.

Furious, I stab my food, wondering how long the wretched dinner will last. Hearing the fork clink against the plate provides an odd satisfaction.

Heaven forbid I chip the china.

"What's got you so upset, Mudblood?" Nott interrupts my tantrum.

I lift my eyes to him but leave my head bowed, then look to Draco for help. He told me not to talk, but I'd love to tell this piece of shit where he can shove his condescending inquiry.

Draco raises one eyebrow looking bored and cocky. He doesn't indicate how I should proceed other than a minuscule shake of his head. Anyone else would have missed it, but I'm bound to him, and I sense the warning in his mood.

Without saying a word he orders me not to make a scene. It doesn't matter anyways because before I can tell Nott to fuck off, Zabini retakes his seat, grumping, "Come off it, Theo. You know he never lets her speak at these get-togethers."

My eyebrows rise, and my eyes widen in shock.

"I'd love to hear from her though, wouldn't you? I bet she's raging mad. She was a self-righteous bitch at school and now that she's shackled to Drake she always looks livid." His shit-eating grin is unnerving. "— quiet, but livid."

What is he talking about? I *always* look livid.

"How much do you remember, Mudblood?" Nott continues. He takes another sip of his drink and leans back in his chair, eyeing me. "Do you remember watching Potter die?"

My entire body tenses.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as I kick myself for not verifying more facts before now. I don't even know how everything turned out. I left so much to chance.

"Do you remember being tortured by the Dark Lord as he ripped into your mind trying to extract information for a month after the battle?"

"That's enough," Draco's quiet order shuts Nott up. He immediately stops talking but acts like he just wants more to drink. Instead, he takes a long pull from his glass tumbler, pretending like he wasn't just reprimanded.

There is an uncomfortable silence before Draco drops his napkin on his plate and stands.

"If the Dark Lord and I haven't been able to extract any memories from her yet, then your drunk-ass certainly won't be able to, Nott." The other men also stand, pushing in their chairs as Draco welcomes them to the parlor. "Let's move this party somewhere more comfortable."

I stand, dreading what's to come. If the night has been this awful in the formal dining room, I don't want to see what happens when they let their hair down.

However, I jolt in surprise when Draco cuffs my upper arm and drags me towards the hallway. "I'll only be a minute," he drawls to his guests.

"Oh, come on Draco, you never let us play with her." Nott sneers, trying to get a final rise out of me.

The man doesn't know when to quit.

"Keep your mouth shut until we get to our room."

Draco drags me through the Manor, headed upstairs. I know he can sense my desire to turn around and attack those disgusting pigs.

The sconces burn, but the corridors are as dark as my mood. How dare he order me around after that scene.

"Why *Drake*? Don't you want to bring me to the parlor too?" I'm so upset that my hair is sparking with magic. "Or are you too afraid I'll ruin the fun you plan to have?"

He keeps moving, ignoring my outburst.

When we reach the bedroom, Draco pushes me inside the door. "You've made an appearance. Now you aren't needed."

As he turns to leave, my heart aches. I need to know the truth, or I'll go crazy. "Wait! Was he telling the truth? Is Harry Potter dead?"

My voice wavers as I search for answers.

"No."

Thank God.

"Stay put. I'll be back later," Draco orders.

My skin crawls as I think about what the women downstairs are about to go through. What type of *fun* was Nott alluding to? I feel like I already know.

I can't be here while that's going on downstairs and I'm not interested in waiting up for Draco.

"I'm not staying here." I run my fingers through my hair, brushing it out of my face, then cross my arms and pop my hip. "Like you said, I did my part. I'm going back to the vacation house." I stare Draco down, refusing to act afraid of him anymore. "You can come over tomorrow so that we can lay out our plan to kill the *Dark Lord*."

Now that I've given up grieving for the time being, I want to get on with our plotting. Otherwise, I left for nothing.

Draco pushes up his sleeves and fists his wand, unfazed by my retort. His arrogant, bored eyes drive me crazy. He's so condescending.

"No, Hermione. That's not what's going to happen." He walks toward the hall and says over his shoulder, "I'll be back late. You may go to bed if you like." He lifts his chin, indicating the bed we used to share. "I'll wake you when I return."

As soon as he leaves, I call Millie and ask her to take me back to the vacation house, ignoring Draco. She's no help, though. All she does is wring her hands, telling me, "Master wants you here."

I try Floo powder but realize Voldemort's lackies might be monitoring the network. Then I consider Apparating but find that the Manor wards also prevent me from leaving.

When I run out of options, I'm so mad that I decide to wait up for Draco to rip his head off.

Who the hell does he think he is, trapping me here?!

But Draco doesn't return.

My eyes droop around 4 am, so I call Millie back, incredulous that the party might still be raging. However, she lets me know that Draco sent his guests home, but then he was needed elsewhere, so he couldn't return to me.

My battle against my heavy eyelids ends when I succumb to sleep around 6:30 am. I'm out for hours but wake up when Draco sits on the bed the following afternoon.

Sensing the bed dip, I bolt up. "What are you doing?" I demand as he pulls off his boots, drags his shirt over his head, and then lays down.

"Getting some sleep, finally," he says, sounding like that should be obvious.

"Not, with me you aren't!"

Draco rolls on his back and throws his arm over his eyes to ward off the light.

"Hermione—I had a long night. I won't tolerate a fight." Keeping his eyes closed, he reaches for his wand on the bedside table and, when he finds it, casts a spell to close the black-out curtains. "We can talk more after I've had a few hours to sleep."

I can't believe this man. He actually wants me to feel sorry for the fact that he had to stay up all night terrorizing witches with some of his disgusting friends. I know Millie said he ended the party and sent everyone home before being called away again, but that doesn't make sense either.

"Go sleep somewhere else! Or let me leave! I have no patience for your horrid, cryptic, comings and goings." I snap while hopping out of bed. "Why do you even need to run raids for your boss anymore? Hasn't the war been over for years?"

Draco turns his back to me, sighing, "I never claimed to be out doing work for the regime." He adjusts the pillow under his head, punching at the feathers. "Now, be quiet and let me sleep, unless you'd rather provide a more enjoyable way to keep me up."

"You wish," I cross my arms and sneer.

He takes a deep breath and shifts again, trying to find a comfortable position despite our ongoing fight.

"I *do* wish," he clips. "—and so do you, by the way. Don't forget I can feel how wet you are through the bond."

Draco isn't wrong. I cross my legs at his words, attempting to ward off my need for him. I haven't taken my suppressants in about twenty-four hours, and the effects are uncomfortable.

I gasp at his crassness, shaking with needy jitters from being near him again. "Millie!" I yell, not bothering to ask Draco for anything.

When she appears, I demand, "Bring me more heat suppressants!" Then, not wanting to sound like a jerk I remember to add, "Please." None of this is her fault, and I want to stop taking out my frustration on her just because she knows more than me or defers to Draco over my demands. Elf loyalty is old and complicated magic. I know that she doesn't choose sides out of spite.

She is back in her dress and jumper again, which causes me to breathe a small sigh of relief, but then my eyes furrow. She looks like she hasn't been washing her clothes. There are stains all over her top. That's odd, but I can't get sidetracked. I need to calm my arousal to think straight. In fact, I refuse to be pushed around anymore just because my body craves Draco's. I can't be so dependent on his touch.

Before she has a chance to respond, Draco sits up and barks, "Leave us, Millie. Now!"

Then, he sighs and leans against the headboard. "We aren't suffocating our desires anymore. I'll give you a few more days, but you're going to be panting underneath me from here on out." Running his hands through his hair again, he grumps, "Those potions aren't made for long-term use."

"The fuck I am!" I snap, repeating Draco's words from yesterday.

Draco drops his brows and pulls his lips to one side in a patronizing scowl, but he doesn't respond. Instead, he rolls his eyes and turns over again, trying to fall asleep.

Incensed, I scramble to his side of the bed and throw back the covers, snarling. "Get out!"

With reflexes as quick as ever, Draco grabs my wrist and pulls me down, pinning me to his chest on the bed. Incredulous, I wrestle to stand as our bodies rise and fall together. He wraps his arms around me in response.

"Stop," he orders, nuzzling his face into my curls. "That's enough."

"Get off me!!" Since I'm trapped beneath his heavy arms, I buck against him to break free. "Don't come anywhere near me. I can't stand to look at you knowing you're so indifferent to the lives of the witches around you!" I continue railing at him, trying not to notice how good it feels to be in his embrace. "You're right! My Draco died! He never would've sat by as innocent women were abused right in front of his eyes."

Draco huffs a sardonic laugh. "Wouldn't I, love? I seemed altruistic to you?" His comment drips with sarcasm. "You saw me running around saving witches back in 1997?" He pauses for a second, letting his arrogant questions sink in. When I roll my lips, not saying anything, he continues. We both know he's right. My Draco never talked about saving anyone other than his family. "Are you sure you knew me, Hermione?"

I freeze, thrown by his comment. Of course, I knew him. An ache blooms in my chest while I reflect. No, I didn't see him saving witches because he was too busy trying to keep his loved ones alive. But he would have tried to help if he wasn't stuck doing Voldemort's bidding, right?

Draco's voice sounds raw and pained when he adds, "You don't even know what you're talking about."

Too tired to force me to lay with him any longer, Draco releases me. Then, when I jump out of bed, he throws his legs over the edge of the mattress and hangs his head between his knees, rubbing at the back of his neck.

"Oh? Well then enlighten me, you abusive bastard!" I snap

Draco's eyes shoot to mine when I don't back down. He's mad again. I've kept him from sleep and reminded him how cruel he's become.

Throwing his hands out, he yells, "Damn it, Hermione! I spent half the night trafficking those Bloody witches out of England!" His eyes burn now as he brings me to task. "Call me an abusive bastard again!" he challenges.

"What!?" That's the last thing I thought he would say.

Watching my sudden change in mood from self-righteous to shocked, Draco takes a deep breath and admits, "They're safe. I didn't let Nott and Zabini hurt them." He's pissed, trying to get me to calm down. "You and I have smuggled nearly one hundred and fifty Muggleborn witches out of Europe over the past six years."

"WHAT!?!"

Everything freezes. I'm temporarily dumbfounded. I scan his features, trying to understand what kind of game he is playing, but only see the creases of exhaustion around his eyes. Dipping into the bond is when I realize he's telling the truth.

My fingers feel numb, and my breathing quickens. I pull back and narrow my eyes at him, staring into his silver pools. He's guarded and irritated, dragging deep, heavy breaths to calm himself down.

I scrutinize his expression when he repeats, calmer, "We've trafficked one hundred forty-seven witches out of Europe." His softer voice causes me to tense with anticipation. "Well, 149 now, as of tonight."

It can't be true. He's playing another game to get me to shut up. It's a cruel trick, one that makes me question everything. No! He's lying. The idea that we worked together to bring

about as much relief as possible for these women is so appealing that it brings tears to my eyes. I step back and try to imagine the women from last night, now suddenly free, walking around Egypt together or somewhere else.

This is mean. Why would Draco lie about this!? It can't be true! He said that the younger version of himself died!

I squint at him, trying to piece apart his furrowed brows and heavy eyelids.

That's when I see it!

Something changes in his expression that causes me to suck in a tight breath. I take a few more steps back from where he sits at the edge of the bed, then lock eyes with him. Neither of us breathes as we stare at one another, searching for the truth in our gaze.

Finally, I can't hold myself back any longer. I walk back to him and ghost my fingers over his temple in search of my love.

"Draco?" I breathe.

Years unfold between us as we pause, determining how much we can trust one another—how much we can let ourselves hope for.

I hold my breath, waiting for him to say something, anything.

But Draco remains silent for what feels like a pulsing and weighty eternity.

Then his eyes soften, and he nods.

My world shatters into a thousand pieces of expectation, joy, grief, and love. A shiver runs up my spine, and our love story flashes before my eyes—the first kiss we shared in 1997, the way he took me each night in the penthouse, our eyes when we gazed at one another, and the wind whipped our faces on Grasmoor. Somewhere, deep in my shocked state, my magical core sighs with relief, whispering, *he's here*.

As if my body reacts without my permission, I slam my lips to his. Draco growls in pleasure, fisting my hair and crushing me to his body, then slamming me into the mattress. He takes control, letting me know this is real.

Somehow, he's made his way back to me or me to him. Either way, we've finally connected as one, which causes us to devour one another.

I suck on his bottom lip, then Draco thrusts his tongue into my mouth while running his hand up and down my body. Everywhere he touches, it instantly sets on fire. I'm scorched with desire for my husband—the man I married. He's still in there. He's still here with me.

I have so many questions about what happened since I left. Where are the Order members? How did we save those witches? But I can't force myself to draw away from him, so instead, I crawl onto his lap, wrap my legs around his hips, and then lift off the mattress to glide my clothed, soaked sex over his length.

Stars cross my vision when we both shutter from the perfect feel of our bodies against one another.

"Hermione—"

He utters my name like a prayer, then dips his head to suck on the curve of my neck. His tongue slides over my pulse point, eliciting a shameless moan of pleasure.

Giving into the wave of relief I feel, I pull up his shirt, finger the seam where his pants meet the hard plain of his stomach, then I slide my hand under his waistband to wrap my hand around his raging cock. Draco feels heavy in my palm. He throbs in my hand as I pump once,

twice, then glide my thumb over his tip, collecting his precum and using it to moisten my grip.

Draco reciprocates by shoving his calloused hand between my legs and pressing his thumb to my waiting bundle of nerves. His touch nearly makes me cum. In response, I press my forehead to his, chest heaving, as we both use our hands to bring each other off.

I whine in appreciation, running my hand along his cock to cup his sack, gently squeezing. When Draco's breath catches, I smile into his shoulder, then bite down in ecstasy as he penetrates me with two of his thick fingers, fucking me with his hand.

I fist him again, picking up the pace and matching his thrusts with my pulls on his velvety shaft.

Panting now, Draco returns to my clit and applies the perfect amount of delicious pressure as he begins to rub small circles.

The perfect union of our hands sends tears to my eyes. I don't know what this means, and I don't know where this confession will lead, but I know that I just saw him—the love of my life, the man I've spent the last week grieving. He's here.

Somewhere, deep inside Draco's hard exterior, is my husband. The one I committed my life to on a mountain top. The one I thought I lost forever.

My breath hitches as I start to rise. Draco leans to pull my bottom lip into his mouth, smiling, as he starts thrusting his hips, chasing his own release. I milk him, trying to stay grounded to the Earth as we ascend the heavenly plain of touch and taste and feel— oh gods, yes, feel.

"Take off your clothes."

"I can't, I'm too close. Don't stop!"

Draco nips my lip, repeating, "Witch, take off your fucking clothes."

Giving a pained moan, I yank my hand from his pants and start to shimmy out of my pajama bottoms. I try to move as little as possible so as not to disturb Draco's fingers from their place, lodged between my tight lips and sliding over my sensitive nub.

When my pants and knickers are balled up under my feet, Draco holds his weight on his forearm and uses his other hand to drag his pants over his hips. I'm just about to whine from the loss of his skilled fingers, but before I can, Draco crashes his blunt head onto my clit.

Lightening shoots through my lower abdomen and curls my toes. My vision blurs, and I start to pant as Draco pumps himself against me. When he feels my wanton need, Draco chuckles. It's an arrogant laugh that's uniquely him.

I ignore his gloating as I pant beneath him and match his pace again. I slide my dripping sex over him and rock my hips back and forth when his velvet head presses into my clit.

Draco almost violently jerks himself off between my pussy lips, then thrusts a few more times before exploding. His hot, thick cum gushes out, flooding me with his ownership. The sensation is all I need to cascade over the chasm of infinite pleasure. I scream out his name as a praise and thank the gods that they let me experience this intense love-making.

When I float down from the clouds, Draco is still slowly rubbing his seed onto my clit.

His movements slow as we attempt to catch our breath. I come down in silence, noticing the scandalous possession of me that Draco exhibits as he collects his essence and shoves it into my channel.

His heavy weight rests on me as we slow our breathing, and my sharp nipples drag along his naked chest. I savor the comforting weight of his presence, enjoying the aftershocks of my mind-numbing release.

The room is dark and warm. The covers are balled up at our feet, and I listen to the distant sound of music playing somewhere in the Manor. Then, when I've had time to clear my thoughts, everything sinks in.

"Draco? What's going on?" He lets out a deep sigh in response to my question and rolls off me. "How did you free those witches? What do you mean we saved 150 women over the past six years?" He opened a bottomless pit of curiosities. I have to know more.

Exhausted, Draco warns, "Hermione, I need sleep." He cleanses us with a spell, then tucks me into his chest again, finally settling into the perfect comfort that is our connection. "I'll tell you more when I get a few hours of rest."

I accept that I won't get much else out of him right now, but I have to ask again. This time, my voice sounds vulnerable and raw.

"Draco?"

Brushing my hair behind my ears, he hums, "Shh, It's me. I'm here. You're safe."

Chapter 33: Everything

Chapter Summary

"You and me
We were lovers in a past life
Slow dancin' in the midnight glow
I wanna hold you for a lifetime
For all we know
And these are familiar places
And maybe we're not just strangers
You and me
We were lovers in a past life
For all we know"
-Lovers in a Past Life, Calvin Harris & Rag'n'Bone Man

June 1998

I don't understand, and I'm starting to get really scared.

"Sir, just keep calm. Yous okay," Millie yelps, meeting us at the door and helping me up. She notches her bony hands into my bent elbow, but she's not talking to me. Then, in an almost comedic stunt, the elf turns my way. "Oh, hi, Mrs." She acts like she's surprised to see me, and I'm not snarling mad. "Would you like lunch?"

My face contorts with confusion. Is she actually acting like I didn't just hear all that—like I'm not sprawled out on the floor from eavesdropping?

"Millie, you're awful at this," Draco drawls as he hangs his head and pinches the bridge of his nose. "—and she's too smart!" They're both talking about me like I'm not here.

What the fuck is going on??

"I have no idea how to keep this up," he tells the elf.

They're still ignoring me, sending a sharp spike of anger down my back.

"Someone give me some Bloody answers before I hex you both to Oblivion!"

Draco runs his fingers through his hair, turns to leave, storms back, then attempts to go again. It's evident that he is wrestling with himself about how to handle this situation.

"Where the hell are you going?" I shout as he decides to walk away. "You owe me some answers!"

Draco stops. He stares at the ceiling, drawing upon some inner strength, but fails. "I owe *you*? Right," he huffs.

Confused by this ordeal but unwilling to back down, I snap, "Well, why the Hell would I owe you anything!?"

That does it. Draco whips around, staring daggers at me. His brows are furrowed, and his eyes hold nothing but contempt. He stares me down for a beat, then growls, balls his fists, and explodes. "GOD DAMN IT, HERMIONE!"

His vitriol stuns me into silence. My throat closes, and my face grows hot. I shake my head in disbelief and drop my jaw, ready to snap back at him. But Draco storms off, down the hall and out of sight.

I let him go, making a beeline for his office, determined to find some answers for myself if no one was going to tell me what was really going on. I slam open the door, causing Millie to squeak, then march to his desk and throw open drawers to rifle through their contents. The stacks of parchment shift as I search his desk, looking for anything that hints at some clarifying data.

"Mrs?" Millie runs into the room behind me. When I lift my angry eyes in response, I catch her tiny head bopping my way. "You shouldn't be in here. Master—"

"Millie," I interrupt. I had an idea, but I'm unsure if it will work. Draco gives orders to the elves. I've noticed him asking for things or telling them to tend to me. I even asked about it the other day and learned more than I ever wanted to know about House elf duties from a sturdy-looking elf named Harvy.

With my weight resting on my arms, I lean against Draco's desk's lacquered wood and try to extract information from her with all my might.

"Tell me about my accident."

Her eyes blow wide, and she presses her lips tightly together.

"Tell me why Draco is so upset!"

Her ears flap as she shakes her head, saying, "I can't tell Mrs. anything. That is up to Master Draco to share."

Slamming the drawer closed, I yell, "Does he keep anything in here other than monogrammed parchment?!!"

I flop down on the floor, resting my back against the wood and hugging my knees to my chest, trying to sort out everything that transpired this afternoon. I'm still reeling from all that I heard. Nothing makes sense.

"I don't understand," I whisper, resting my head on my arms.

All the sudden, I'm exhausted. I have so little information about myself and the world. The weight of my situation is crushing.

When she hears my defeat, Millie runs to me and places her hand on my shoulder. She hasn't touched me before, so the act causes me to lift my gaze and tilt my head. Then, with all the confidence in the world, my elf friend says, "Things be confusing, Mrs., and I can't tell yous what's going on. But, I can tell yous this —" She rubs my back and comforts me while insisting, "Master Draco loves yous. Yous love Master Draco. Yous are where yous needs to be."

An hour later, I push open the door to the Manor's Potions Lab in search of Draco. When I do, I find glass littering the floor and ripped-up papers strewn about, as if he came here to decimate the place in his anger. I squint in the darkness of the space and am about to turn around to try another room when I hear him clear his throat.

I follow the noise to a high-backed wooden chair on the far wall that is facing away from me. As I step over broken cauldrons and crumbled stacks of firewood on my way towards him, I'm careful not to trip. I find Draco leaning back against the wood. His hair is on his face, and his legs are haphazardly resting on a pile of books. The air feels stale. I roll my eyes, throwing my weight to my back leg and crossing my arms when I watch him pull a long drag from his tumbler.

"Hullo, love."

I scowl.

He's drunk.

"Hi."

"Come to hex me into oblivion?" he taunts.

For a long time, I don't respond. Instead, I scan the room to take in its total disrepair. Then I brush some fuzz off of my sleeve. "You've been busy making a mess in here," I say, meaning of the space *and yourself*.

My double entendre isn't lost on my secretive husband as he fingers the glass rim and huffs a dark laugh. "Yeah, Whelp."

He knocks back another swig of the amber liquid in his cup.

Is this the real him? A drunk?

I close my eyes and try for the millionth time to pull forward memories, but like always, I'm unsuccessful.

So instead, I glare, trying to figure him out, while rubbing my fingers over my forehead and wincing at the pain. Then I pull in a tight breath through my clenched teeth.

Draco straightens, "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" I snap. There is a tense silence before I take a deep, steadying breath to start again. "Millie calmed me down and I thought we should probably talk. I don't like the way we left things."

Draco frowns, then brushes his hair out of his face, irritated that I'm still angry. He stands to pour another glass and says over his shoulder, "Not tonight. We can talk more when we've both had time to cool off." It's odd how, even in his ruined state, he can still wield such authority in his voice and stature.

I kick at a broken beaker at my foot. "Yeah, you seem a bit out of sorts." Then I watch Draco stiffen before shaking his head and downing another glass.

"Right," he drawls.

Since we don't seem to be making any progress, I let out a deep sigh and try to find anything to say that will help move this conversation along. I'm on a mission to find out more information. "Did we used to fight like this, or is this new for us?"

Leaning against the long counter with his weight on one arm, Draco sets his glass down a little too hard and quips, "Nope." He wants me to leave him alone. "We never fought. Not once." He sounds harsh like he's having a laugh at my expense. "Not until today."

Incensed, I spit, "Fine, Draco, whatever. I thought I'd extend an olive branch, but you're being petulant." I walk away and add, "Come and find me when you're sober." Frustrated as I am, I trudge back to the door, not paying enough attention.

Draco watches me go with a cruel nonchalance. He seems to be keeping himself from telling me where to shove it. When I catch his stupid expression, I narrow my eyes at him and whip around just in time to feel the glass bottle slip beneath my foot.

"Oh!"

The exclamation is all I have time to utter before I'm tumbling through the air. Debris crashes as I fall, creating a cloud of tinkling glass and rustling papers. Attempting to protect myself, I tuck my shoulder inward to take the full brunt of the impact and then smack along the floor, cutting my arm on a jagged piece of bent metal.

"Hermione!"

Draco shoots across the room. He crouches above me, forgetting his sour mood.

"Bugger!" I moan, grabbing at my arm. "Bloody hell, I'm bleeding!"

I raise my eyes, shooting daggers at Draco. None of this would have happened if he had just talked to me like an adult in the first place — if he had told the truth instead of evading my questions and throwing fits.

Draco reaches out to inspect the damage, but I pull back. "Stop squirming. You're making it worse," he huffs.

"Screw you!" I snap, trying to scooch away from him.

We vie for the upper hand, wrestling back and forth, pissed. Then Draco fists my arm a little too hard, ordering me. "Stay still! I'll grab some Dittany." I hate the fact that he suddenly wants to help. This man is so infuriating. He's been a charming robot for weeks, but today, he flashes between hot and cold. I can't figure out who he really is. So, I try to yank my arm from his hold again.

"Love! You're ridiculous!" Draco yells while clamping back down on me. "Just let me ruddy help you! Stay still!"

He fists a bottle on the counter near us and checks the label. Verifying that he grabbed the right potion, Draco uncorks it one-handed and then bends to drip the liquid onto my fresh wound.

"Stop! No! I told you, I don't trust your fucking potions!"

Grabbing fistfuls of his hair, Draco roars, "Hermione! Can't you make anything easy!? You know I'm not trying to hurt you! I've proven that twice already!"

He leans over again, grasping my arm harder to still my frantic movements and continue his medical care.

"NO!" I cry. Tears fill my eyes, and I swipe them away, trying not to seem silly and weak.

Draco pauses when he sees how upset I am.

I take a few deep breaths, then compose myself to explain, "Not after everything that happened today. I don't trust it." We both know what I really mean is *you!*

Growling in frustration Draco pushes himself up and stomps to the high shelves behind us. He scans the bottles and then grabs one that holds a swirling, transparent liquid. Satisfied, he pops the top and takes a huge swig, slamming the bottle back down before swiping his hands through the air as if to say, *Happy?*

I jump on the invitation.

"Is it safe?"

"Yes," he says through tight lips.

Nodding, I then make a scene of picking up the Dittany while Draco waits. "Stay there! I can do it myself." I rub it on my arm with my back to him.

This worked out perfectly!

I watch my deep scratch heal, then inch around.

Draco's eyes are on his chest, where his hand rests as if he feels the moment I corner him.

"Are we really married? Why do things seem so strange here? Can I trust you? Are you hiding things from me?"

Before he's able to catch himself, Draco blurts out.

"Yes. Because I'm trying and failing at holding together an extremely complicated deception. Yes and no — mostly yes. Yes, but I love you...even though I'm furious with you!"

As he unwillingly answers all my questions, Draco pulls out his wand quicker than I've ever seen him move. He flicks it at me with rage in his eyes, suddenly stone sober. In response, my throat clenches. With my eyes wide in fear, I throw my hands to my neck. A moment later, I open and shut my mouth, trying to make any sound come out, but nothing works.

I knew that I'd need to be quick. It's clear from Draco's burning eyes that I won't be able to get in another question now that he silenced me. However, I squirm as Draco stalks forward, causing my nerves to flutter and tingle throughout my shoulders.

He crosses the room, leans over, and pins me down with his steely gaze. When he talks, his voice is low and unnerving.

"I love you." He pauses to make his truth serum-laden point clear. "But, you will *never* do anything like that to me again."

The intensity of Draco's anger is caustic. It makes me fold in on myself, cowering.

"You have an awful way of showing it sometimes, but you love me too." He shoves his hands in his pockets and claims all the air in the room. He finishes reprimanding me by

annunciating each syllable: "You're. safe. here. with. me."

Then he turns around and leaves, giving me back my voice and slamming the heavy door on his way out.

So, he was telling the truth about us being married, but he's only somewhat trustworthy. He is trying to deceive and keep things from me, but we definitely love each other, and I'm safe here.

I'm staring at the vast sky, trying to dissect everything I just learned, as puffy clouds lumber across the horizon above me.

After Draco stormed away, I found myself in the gardens. I don't remember walking from the Potions Lab because I was lost in thought. However, my legs seemed to know what I needed because the warm breeze is refreshing.

I ambled through the hydrangeas and roses, running my hand along the leaves and careful not to press too hard on the thorns. Then, when I stumbled upon a secluded flagstone patio surrounded by tall arborvitae, I flopped down on a bench.

Now, the slats of the teak wood press into my back as I continue to process.

When Millie and Draco refused to tell me what was going on, I knew I needed to do something drastic. And I have to admit, my plan worked really well. I hoped that I could trick him into taking the truth potion again, but I worried he might catch on. He always seems so calculated and one step ahead of me. But then I found him drunk.

Lucky me!

A low, guttural peacock calls out to its mate, drawing my attention. I raise my head and scan my surroundings. However, I'm still alone, hidden in the trees.

Laying back down, I picture Draco's expression when he realized I had deceived him. Then, a pit in my stomach blooms. He was scary-calm.

I shiver, then close my eyes and take a deep breath, enjoying the smell of honeysuckle in the air.

There is so much more to my current circumstances than I know, and I need to figure out the whole story, but I probably need a different plan than pushing Draco. It's best if I keep things friendly. Even though my skin is crawling, he and Millie both swear that Draco and I love each other, and Draco was under Veritaserum when he told me that just now.

You have an awful way of showing it sometimes, but you love me too.

You're safe here with me.

I'm safe here.

I close my eyes and let out a deep sigh.

I'm safe.

Before I open my eyes again, there's a loud *Crack!* I bolt up and grab the armrest, steadying my nerves. Then I hear a metal gate open and shut before heavy boots crunch across the pea gravel path. Someone's here.

Everything in me tenses as I consider what I should do with that knowledge.

Maybe I could learn more? But I might also end up in another massive row with Draco.

I stand up slowly, grabbing the back of the bench for support. Then, I brush my curls behind my shoulder.

I'm going to stay here.

I need to think through everything some more, and being alone out here is the perfect place for me right now.

Deciding not to meddle, I sit back down.

Then, a quick staccato of several tiny feet also races up the path. Something spooked the elves.

In response, I shoot up from my bench and slink through the bushes, trying to remain low and out of sight. I can process more later! When I have a clear view of the door, I see that everyone is already inside.

Hmm...

I attune my ears to any sounds that might give me more information but hear nothing except the rustling leaves and trilling birds.

Crack! "Mrs.!"

Millie Apparates behind me, causing me to jump out of my skin. My heart hammers in my chest as I fall forward and have to catch myself on the branches of the hedge in front of me.

"Millie!" I squeak. "Don't *do* that!!"

She grabs my upper arm to help me back up and then barks, "Yous needs to get inside, right now."

"Why?" I pull back —curious as ever.

"Mrs! Yous are coming with me! No arguing!" She points her bony hand in my face. "Yous. Stop—" she pauses, trying to find the right words "—being *yous*! Yous is making everything worse!!"

I catch something in her angry face that makes my brows furrow and my nerves sing to life. She looks scared and pissed.

"O—okay," I stammer.

I might want to stop poking around and just keep my eyes open. Millie looks like she's trying to help me.

I hold out my hand to her, and we're back in my room in a flash.

"Stay here!" She demands, leaving me near the bedside table as she heads for the door.

"Who's here?" I ask, rubbing my arms and hanging my head.

She growls.

"Millie, please." I lower my voice, trying a new tactic. Maybe she will take pity on me if she hears how scared and nervous I am.

With her back to me, she balls her little fists, tightens her shoulders, and then whips around.

"You and Master have terrible times to be fighting!" She narrows her eyes at me to clarify that I'm in trouble. "He drunk! You poisoned him with truth serum! And now bad mens is here."

"What!?" What the fuck? Bad men?

Stomping back to me, Millie tugs on my shirt so that I crouch down, then she says, "Stay up here." She begs me with a finger pointed in my face. "Master is going to have to work very hard not to say something he shouldn't. He cannot be worried about you right now!"

"What??"

The anxious elf turns and leaves, unwilling to share anything else about what's going on. She closes the door on the way out, and I'm pretty sure she also places some wards.

At dinnertime, a vegetable pot pie with gravy and mushy peas arrives on a Silver tray. I pick at the plate and continue to stew for hours.

I feel like I have all the pieces to this strange puzzle at my disposal, but I haven't been able to uncover the full picture. My memories aren't available, so putting those aside, here's what I know.

The facts are that I'm in a large estate with my husband.

We love each other. Draco confirmed that.

I'm safe here.

But there are bad men who visit, and apparently, Draco has to work to conceal things from them.

The things I've been told and might be true are that there was an accident at the end of a war that caused my injury.

Something about that fact scratches the back of my skull. Draco said there was a war. What if it didn't really end? That might explain all the secrecy and bad men. Maybe I was hurt, and he's now stuck keeping us both safe.

I nibble on the flaky crust, trying to imagine any other scenario that could lead to such cryptic behavior, but I come up empty.

Maybe tomorrow, I can find some newspapers to verify whether or not I'm on the right track.

Yes, that's a good idea.

Feeling somewhat settled, with my hypothesis outlined and my research project before me, I brush my hands on my napkin, deciding that I should get some sleep. This day has been unnerving, but Draco says I'm safe here, and staying up all night won't solve anything.

I'm about to stand when three slow knocks on my bedroom door draw my attention.

"Hermione?" Draco's muffled voice calls from the other side of the wood. Casting my eyes to the clock on the mantel, I see that it's now just after eleven.

"Come in," I croak. I haven't talked in hours, and my throat is dry.

At my invitation, the wood creaks open. Draco pushes it wide but stays in the doorway. He looks terrible. His face is paler than usual, and his eyes are sunken. Exhaustion enrobes him.

We pause, holding one another's gaze for a few moments. He looks me over, then breathes a sigh of relief.

"You're okay?" he asks. It seems that talking hurts him. He swallows a lump in his throat and cringes.

"Yeah."

A thousand questions spin around in my mind, but I tamp them down. He doesn't look well, so I won't be able to get very far with him tonight.

"Alright, then." He clears his throat. "I just needed to check on you."

He turns to leave, but I interrupt him. "Draco, tomorrow you need to tell me everything." I try my best to sound confident.

A shiver of pain crosses his features, and he clutches his side in response.

Did he get this bad because of a hangover? How much did he drink?

"Goodnight," is all he says before turning away, and I'm pretty sure I know what his answer means.

Irritation pulls at the back of my neck. I rub the discomfort away and stand, ready to head to bed as planned. However, before I reach the door to the ensuite, I hear a loud *Thud!* Like something tumbled over in the hallway. I tilt back to stare at the door in confusion, then allow myself to become sidetracked again on my way to bed.

Did something fall? From the sound of it, it must have been a bookshelf or some piece of furniture. If not, maybe the elves are up to something?

I turn the knob on my bedroom door and stare into the dark hallway to investigate. There is nothing to my right except the slumbering inhabitants of the various gold frames. But my eyes fly open in shock when I look to the left and discover Draco sprawled out on the floor. He's twitching and in pain.

Without giving it a second thought, I run to him. An ache in my chest drives me forward, causing me to forget my frustration.

"Draco??"

He doesn't answer but instead moans. The sound spurs me into action. I crash to the ground and roll him over to discover a frightening sight. He is foaming at the mouth, and his eyes are rolled back.

Shit!

This is a lot more than a hangover. Something is very wrong! He looks like he has been poisoned. I dart my eyes around the hall, remembering what Millie said about bad men, and realize I need to move quickly.

What did he ingest? What potions did this? He looks like he can't breathe—oh gods! I need an antidote, but I don't know what he bloody took. Plus, the potion lab downstairs is trashed.

"Draco? Can you hear me? What happened??" He doesn't respond. "Draco!?"

A sharp tug in my magical core is crying out for me to help him. It causes my breath to catch, and my mind churns as I try to remember what Gallpalot said.

Equal to or greater than the parts?

Spurred into action, I Apparate downstairs and slam open the door of the lab. It's clear there isn't any time for running through the house. Then I crash across the room jumping over debris and arriving at the tall shelves.

Potion, potion, potion

What can help me? What do I do? What do I do? The glass clinks as I fumble around the shelf in fear: frog spawn and Verllarian root leak from broken jars. I start to panic, afraid I won't be able to find anything to help.

Then I see it—a small box labeled *Bezoars!* I'm thrilled. I peel back the top and dump several shriveled beans into my palm before turning on the spot to Apparate upstairs again.

When I reach him, my stomach turns. Draco is convulsing on the ground.

Moving on autopilot, I hold his chin, shove the Bezoar past his lips, and wait.

My hands shake as I wait to see if it works.

Ten seconds. Twenty, thirty. With each passing moment, I get more and more nervous. What would I do if Draco was hurt?? As confused as I've been, he's my only foundation.

He continues to thrash as my blood pressure rises. My magical core is pounding against my chest. I feel so desperate to help him that it's hard to think straight or even breathe. I have my hands on either side of his temples, trying to shield his head from smacking against the floor, but I don't want to hold on too hard and risk hurting him further. Just as I'm about to scream for help, his movements slow.

Thank Merlin.

The Bezoar works. He's calming down, and the immediate threat has passed. His breath is labored, and he hasn't opened his eyes yet, so without thinking, I work to make him more comfortable. I levitate him to my room, not giving it a second thought. I have this intense need to keep him near me and safe.

I tuck him into the bed and watch the remainder of the poison's effects leave him as he sleeps.

Days pass as I wait. Millie finds us the first morning and looks thrown to find Draco in my bed and ill, but she leaves me to keep watch, only coming back to bring my food or help me ply Draco with more healing potions.

As he sleeps, I realize something. I trust him. I believe what he's told me all along about how we're in love because I feel it in my bones. It's like my body remembers what my mind can't. At my core, I understand that Draco is my soulmate.

I don't know what is going on in the wizarding world to make our lives so dangerous. I don't know who these bad men are or what happened to him, but I know Draco is trustworthy.

I spend days sitting on the bed near him, running a cool cloth over his head or ensuring he isn't too uncomfortable. He looks so peaceful when he sleeps like all his worries wash away when I'm near him. I get that. I feel it, too, and realizing that my presence does more for his comfort than any charm or potion makes me feel connected to him in ways I can't describe.

Finally, on the third day, he wakes.

As I exit the loo, I stop, realizing he is sitting up and taking in his surroundings, looking confused.

I wait with great anticipation. Then, when he runs his hand over his forehead and finally meets my gaze, I freeze. My breath catches in my throat.

We stare at one another for a long moment, and I watch several emotions cross his features. He's relieved to see me, unsure what to say, then overcome with emotion when he realizes I'm here with him.

"Draco?" I whisper. "Are you okay?"

"What happened?" he asks.

"You collapsed. I think you were poisoned."

Draco's eyes widen but then drop into a pissed-off, incredulous scowl.

"I, uh, helped." I rub my arms as I breathe, "I got a Bezoar, then stayed to make sure you were okay."

His expression softens, and he looks overcome with awe. "You helped me?" He drops his head, smiling at his chest. "After everything?" Still recovering, he coughs. "Again. You did it again." He's talking more to himself than me. Then, without lifting his head, he says in astonishment, "You brilliant witch."

"Of course, I did," I croon, "I had to. You were so sick." What does he mean, again?

I walk to the bed and grab his hand.

"Are you okay?" I cry. "I don't know what happened. Were you hurt because you were under Verituserum? Millie said—"

His eyes are molten as he stares at me. He places his hand on my cheek, running his thumb under my eye to collect a tear.

"Shh," he soothes. It wasn't your fault." He stares into my eyes with wonder and then repeats, "After everything, you still helped me."

It seems like he is holding himself back with a barely concealed fever.

Without thinking, I place my hand on his jaw, asking, "Are you okay?" with a shaking voice.

We stare at one another for a moment, and the world stops spinning. I can feel it—his love for me—mirrored in my chest. An unending ocean of adoration passes between us before I throw caution to the wind and rely on my instincts.

I lean in and kiss him.

Relieved, Draco slams his mouth to mine. Our lips hardly touch before he claims me, causing me to melt. This gorgeous man almost died doing whatever he was doing to protect me. I want to know everything there is to know about him. I want to absorb into him.

He devours me. Soft and warm.

"I can't do it, " he says into my mouth, unwilling to draw away. "I can't do what you asked of me. I can't stand you hating me." He sounds wrecked with emotion.

He sucks on my bottom lip and licks along the seam.

"What?" I ask, still kissing him back with desperation.

Holding both of my cheeks between his large hands, Draco pulls back. His silver eyes smolder as he promises, "Hermione—"

"Yes?" I breath

"I need to tell you."

"What?"

Time freezes as I realize what he says next will change —

"Everything."

Chapter 34: Later

Chapter Summary

"Mmm, if I could melt your heart
We'd never be apart
Mmm, give yourself to me
You are the key"
-Madonna X Sickick

May 2005

I can't move.

Draco passed out next to me several hours ago, and I can't take my eyes off of him.

My mind churns with everything that happened this afternoon, and I don't know what to make of it all. I feel jittery with anticipation, waiting for him to wake up and explain what's going on.

He freed those witches.

We freed over a hundred women?

The idea is so enticing that it hurts. But it leaves several gaping holes. Like, what the hell really happened after I returned to the future? Did he really—?

I startle from my train of thought when Draco sighs and rolls over. In his sleep, he captures me under his heavy arms and pulls me to his chest. I let out a soft *oof*! Not expecting him to reach out for me in his slumber, then wait with wide eyes, staring at the wall.

Part of my body feels on fire with nervous energy from being held by him, pressed against his rigid torso. But, another baser instinct hums to life. I'm home.

I take a deep breath and revel in his scent. He smells the same in every time period, which makes me smile. However, I also catch something sweet and clean. That's new.

The gentle, thrumming energy between us shifts.

"Draco?" I whisper.

"Mhmm?"

He's not fully awake yet, but I sense him rousing. He buries his face in my curls and growls in pleasure, then he hardens at my backside.

"Gods, it's good to have you in my bed again." He shifts his hips, notching his length between my legs.

I can't breathe. Draco's touch is like sin.

"We need to talk."

Rolling on top of me, he demands, "Later," while capturing my mouth in a mind-numbing kiss. I permit his soft lips to devour mine and our tongues to caress before whining.

"No, we need to talk. I *need* to hear what's happened," My breath catches as he slides his hand under my shirt to palm my breast. "I can't wait any longer."

Draco's arrogant smile grates at my nerves as he speaks into my lips, "You can," then reaches to pull himself from his pants.

"No, stop," I insist, half-heartedly pushing him away.

Pop! "Master?" Millie bursts in on us, which is unusual for her. After a few mishaps in 1998, Draco drilled into her the importance of giving us privacy in the bedroom unless absolutely unavoidable. "You is needed again."

His deep guttural response rumbles in his chest as he touches his forehead to mine and scrunches his eyes.

"Fuck! She has the worst timing."

Trying to push him away again and finding myself more successful this time, I shoot back, "No, she has very good timing!"

Draco pulls back, confused, but then he shakes it off.

As much as I ache to feel him inside me, I can't spend a second more without finding out the complete picture of what's happening!

"I'll be back."

"What!?"

Draco throws his legs over the side of the bed and hangs his head between his knees before standing. Then he grabs a discarded t-shirt and pulls it on.

"Where are you going? What do you mean, you'll be back?! When?" I sputter, jumping out of bed.

As he shoves his feet back in his boots, I race around the bed to force him to answer my questions. I plant myself in front of him, blocking his path as he heads towards the fireplace. But Draco simply places his heavy hands on my shoulders and moves me aside.

"Later."

He kisses my forehead as I bat him away.

"What?!"

And then he's gone in a *Whoosh!* of green flames.

I whip around to demand answers from Millie, but she catches one look of my aghast expression and Apparates away.

Later, I'm a mess of emotions, waiting for Draco to return again. I pace in front of the fire in the library, fuming. He's been gone all day.

The only benefit is that I've been able to scour these bookshelves for information. I found the stack of *Daily Prophets* Draco gave me and leafed through them again, but this time with new eyes.

Frustrated, I clutch one article in my fist while rereading it. It's one that I remember seeing before, but now the details stand out.

June 30, 1998

Officials Sworn in for Lord Voldemort's Regime

Since the final battle occurred over a month ago, we at the Daily Prophet have been covering the transition to our new formidable leader.

Our Lord conquered the rebel army and therefore issued a new day for wizarding Britain — one where magic remains with those worthy to call themselves wizards, and our kind isn't relegated to the shadows of society. With his ambitious plans to upturn the International Statute of Secrecy, Lord Voldemort finds himself out of the country most days and, therefore, must establish a governing structure.

That brings us to the installation of Britain's new ruling seats. After a vicious couple of weeks of vying for the top spots—which included the attempted murder of one Death Eater, Draco Malfoy—the pronouncements are finally available.

We just learned that Pius Thickness will remain Lord Voldemort's proxy for Minister for Magic. He, of course, has played that role for over a year. The newest developments, though, are the naming of Theodore Nott Jr. as the next Secretary of Treasury, Thorfin Rowle as our new Secretary of Commerce, and, not surprisingly, Draco Malfoy as the Head of Magical Law Enforcement.

Nott and Rowle may be lesser-known names to our readers outside the elite Sacred Twenty-Eight. However, Malfoy is undoubtedly no stranger, having both captured and delivered the Lord's Seer —ultimately handing him the win. Our new Ruler then charged Draco Malfoy with wardoning the asset. We have reported on all of these in detail here.

We can all rest easy knowing that we have such an intimidating public servant on our behalf, ensuring our safety, for Merlin knows that no one would want to wind up at the end of our Head of Law Enforcement's wand.

Stay tuned for further updates.

So, I did end up here after the battle. At least, I can confirm that the pieces I laid in place worked as I envisioned. However, there is still so much left unknown.

I crumple the paper, furious that Draco hasn't returned yet. I'm frantic to confirm that what I thought I saw in him earlier wasn't just a dream or grief playing funny tricks on me.

What did he admit? He said we worked to free witches together and that *he* was still here, but that's it.

I toss the paper into the flames in anger.

What if he lied to get me in bed with him?

"Doing a bit of light research?"

Draco's deep voice calls from the doorway.

I stop pacing and push my hair out of my face. Draco looks tired again. His arms are crossed as he leans on the doorframe.

"I didn't really find much more than what you gave me before I ran away from you last year." In my agitation, I fail to keep the harsh bite out of my tone. "I understand a bit more now, though."

"Hmm," is all Draco offers as he fails at covering his irritation. His brows furrow, and his eyes darken.

That's it.

"You need to start talking," I order, throwing my weight to one hip and crossing my arms.

"Do I?" He offers in a challenge.

"Yes!" I motion for the couch, insisting that he sit. Heaving a deep sigh, Draco pushes from the door and stalks over. Once settled, he stares at me, waiting for me to continue. He's still so guarded.

"You're the Head of Magical Law Enforcement?"

Draco nods, looking bored.

He indeed climbed the ladder of power. I had no clue he had a position like that before.

I wince. "And someone tried to murder you?"

Draco drops his jaw to the side and rubs his tongue under his molars. My demanding, battle-worn husband looks pissed, with his eyes hooded to slits. "Yep."

"What happened there?" I whisper.

Draco mumbles, "I wasn't my best that day." Then he frowns, letting me know that's all I'm going to get.

Choosing my battles, I plow on. "And Pius Thickness is the Minister? Why not the evil Bastard himself?"

I step forward because the fire behind me starts to burn, but I don't sit. I want to control this conversation.

"Thickness is a puppet," Draco says with disdain.

He rolls his eyes and reclines, throwing one arm to the back of the couch. Then, he tilts his head to examine the bar cart near the door. He flicks his wand and summons a glass of amber liquid before returning his attention to me.

"The war is presumed over. What is there to enforce?" I ask in a huff.

Draco takes a long pull from his glass and then admits, "Anything he wants." A shadow darkens his expression as if he hates accepting his horrible role.

Breathless, I ask, "And, *how* do you enforce his wants?" I'm not sure I want to know the answer, but luckily, Draco doesn't respond anyway. Instead, he looks even more haunted and then takes another drag. He stares into the flames as my stomach churns.

"So, who's the puppet?" I spit in response, sickened because of his truth by omission.

Draco sits forward, incensed. He points his finger at me over his glass and lowers his voice. "Don't you dare judge me for how I kept us alive!" He's suddenly furious. I must have hit a nerve.

The air snaps between us. Taken aback, I lower my eyes and shuffle my feet, realizing this conversation took a turn I didn't intend. It's so hard for us to connect now. We've been through so much.

"Come here to me," Draco orders, sensing my frustration. I lift my gaze in response.

Before obeying, I ask, "Why did you keep saying that you're no longer the same as the man you were in 1998?"

He takes another steadying breath. "After you left me—" Draco pauses, staring into the flames behind me again in silent contemplation. Then he hangs his head. "—I had to hold everything together on my own." He sits up. "And the fucking stakes have changed."

Once again, pissed that he keeps blaming my departure on me I argue, "*You* made me!"

An early summer breeze presses against the window panes as we endure another long stand-off.

"*Come here*," Draco breaks the silence with his repeated request, leaving no room for arguing as he stresses each word.

Even though I'm still sour, I walk to the couch. When I arrive before my exacting husband, I still don't sit; instead, I thread my knees between his, facing him to maintain my autonomy.

After a beat, his proximity melts some tension, leaving me sadder than anything else. I let out a heavy sigh and place my hand on his cheek. Even though I'm standing, Draco is still almost as tall as me. Tears fill my eyes as I run my thumb over his faded scar.

"How could you, Draco?" I whisper. The words catch in my throat, and I almost can't get them out. "I didn't want to leave you." I'm crying in earnest now.

My vulnerability softens Draco's hard exterior. He's still stern, but when he responds, he reaches to catch my tears with his thumb.

"You didn't return."

I feel the intense power he manipulates between us. While sitting, Draco recaptures the lead as my boldness disappears. He threads his wide hand into my curls and emphasizes his point when I give him a look of confusion. "You were supposed to return to June 2004 but didn't. I waited for weeks, going crazy with worry that you may have changed history. But then I realized what needed to be done."

"How?" I groan.

His hold on my hair tightens. "Time *is* fixed. When you didn't come back I bought every text on the subject and spent months researching time-travel. I also scoured my memories of the night you left me in 1998 and finally put it together."

My knees shake at the sound of his deep, molten voice.

"You weren't on fire with need."

I cock my head to the side and squint. I am still trying to understand what he's getting at.

Draco clarifies, "We hadn't seen one another in over a week before the final battle, but when I showed up in the Forbidden Forest only one of us was wrecked with desire."

I widen my eyes in understanding.

Draco picks up my hand and places it over his heart. "I felt it through the bond."

He's right. I can picture how confused he was that night. He felt the difference but didn't know what to make of it then.

Draco continues, "*You* had already sated your bond." I suck in a tight breath as he finishes. "I realized then that I had already taken you that night."

I flop down on the leather cushion beside him, floored. "So then you came back to retrieve me? How? How many time turners do you have?"

"*Had*" Draco hurries to correct me. "I *had* two." He pulls me into his lap, catches my chin, and makes his point clear. "They're both gone now. We're done fucking around with time." I make to shake him off in indignation, but Draco tightens his grasp. "Do you understand me?"

Eventually, nodding my submission and mumbling, "I know the deal we made," Draco then continues.

"Last year, Nott Sr. paid a right fortune, and desecrated his soul with dark magic in order to make the turners. They were extraordinary—obviously more powerful than anything before. As soon as I heard him boast about them I knew they were the turners we used. Nott sold one to me for a ridiculous price, and kept the other for himself." Draco shifts me to face him while he cages me into his embrace. "When you hadn't returned by new years eve, 2004, and I discovered what I needed to do, I persuaded him to give me the second one "

I drop one eyebrow, drawling, "Persuaded?"

"Let's just say, Theo is happily the head of his house now."

The pit in my stomach grows, considering how dark Draco's life has become. In 1998, the tasks that Voldemort set for him ate away at his soul. Now, he's haunted and resigned to his position. It feels as though he has a dark shadow over him, as circumstance and grief weigh him down.

"I just didn't know how the time turner's magic worked." I admit, lowering my eyes.

Come to think of it now, of course, he would have expected me back the day I left. Draco always wanted me close by. A multi-year separation would not have helped.

"I thought I needed to come back to the same day as the battle—May 15."

Draco's eyes widen. Then he pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a bit to process what I just said. "You just didn't know how to operate the damn turner." Then, he shakes his head and knocks back the rest of his drink. "Fate can go fuck itself."

"Well, it's not like you ever gave me a manual on the thing," I snap back, feeling stupid.

Draco runs his fingers along the seam of my shirt, ghosting over my stomach. "No, I guess I didn't." He pulls me forward to kiss directly next to my eye. In doing so, he removes any potential to continue crying and replaces my sadness with heat.

"What's done is done," he says with frustration in his dark tone, but he continues running his hand over my sensitive skin. "And all that matters is that you're home now."

The way his fingers slide over my skin causes my lower abdomen to flutter and my knickers to become wet. He didn't take me earlier. He got me off, but I didn't get to bliss out as he filled me. I moan when I feel him harden.

"Wait, there's still more we need to discuss!" I bat at his hand to try and stay on task.

"Later."

Draco unbuckles his belt and pulls himself from his waistband without standing. Then, he starts to pull my shirt over my head, but I clamp down on his wrist.

"No, what happened since I left?"

Draco pauses, growling, "*Later*, witch. You expect me to tell you about seven god-damned years before I fuck you!?" He vanishes my shorts, then adds, "You're home. There's time to go over everything, but now is not that time."

He's right. I've gotten a lot out of him already. He's opening up to me. And, even though I still need to figure out how we build back to what we had, he doesn't seem to be the monster I thought him to be.

When I have a clear head, it will be easier for me to understand all the complicated pieces involved in our shared history, but right now, my body aches for his.

"Okay," I breathe, then bend to kiss him. I run my tongue over his lips and dip between them, causing a renewed fever to bloom in our shared core.

Draco reaches behind me to unclasp my bra as I continue to kiss him. When he successfully removes it, my breasts brush against my t-shirt until he lifts it just enough to expose me to him. Then he smashes me to his chest to raise me up and take one of my stiff peaks into his mouth. The silky, wet heat of his lips on my tit makes my eyes roll back in my head. I enjoy the pure sensation of his skilled attention as my body climbs.

Then, suddenly, he pulls back. The movement causes my nipple to pucker even more when the cool air hits it. I don't have long to savor that torture, though, because Draco shifts me to sprawl out on my couch with my head on his lap. He stays leaning against the back of the cushions and drags me to his fisted cock by the nape of my neck.

My mouth waters as he guides me to suck on his tip. I see through the corner of my eye how he tilts his head back in pleasure from my ministrations. I bob once or twice, sucking on him before he pushes down my throat. Draco holds me in place while he rests his heavy arm on my stomach and pushes my panties out of his way. He slides his thick fingers between my lips, and I instantly moan in response.

My humming makes Draco shiver. He begins guiding my head up and down on his shaft while circling my needy clit.

I see stars and pinpricks of light cross my vision while I squirm and writhe.

"That's right, love, take what you need," Draco's husky, arrogant voice coos.

Losing all modesty, I start thrusting back and forth on his hand. He flattens his fingers and allows me to rub my clit against his strong digits. It's scandalous and just what I need.

I need him to direct me— to shove his cock in my mouth and arrogantly demand that I bring myself off on him. It isn't making love yet. I still love him, but we're both hurt and trying to pick up the pieces of our story. No, this is raw and explicit.

I suck on him harder, humming my pleasure on his shaft. My eyes are closed tightly, but the colors behind my lids bloom brightly as the tingling in my stomach takes on weight. I slide over him as his rough digits provide the perfect amount of friction. I'm suspended underwater, feeling the pressure surrounding me. It presses harder and harder, licking over my skin and causing me to pant. I need just a little bit more in the perfect spot to —

Everything in me clenches as a surge of pure arousal pulses throughout my core. My pulse hammers on his fingers, and I roll my hips, pressing every inch of reward from my explosive orgasm. It's so intense that it borders on being painful. I'm soaring, decimated, spent. Then, after what feels like an eternity of waves, I descend.

My mouth is still stuffed with Draco's length while I tug at him in utter reverence. I push air out my nose in heavy breaths and then begin to slow down.

Draco's arousal is through the roof. I feel it in our bond. He's barely holding back. Lost to the need, he wraps my long hair around his fist twice and yanks me off of him. Then he drops my hair once I'm up and cuffs my throat, dragging me into his lap to straddle him. I have just enough time to whip my hair over my shoulder before he wraps his arms around my lower back to hold me steady. Then he impales me.

It knocks the breath out of me. Draco forces his way into my quim and begins rutting against my cervix, chasing his release. He clasps the collar of my blouse and rips it off of me to expose my heavy chest to him, vanishes his shirt, and presses us to one another.

My tits bounce with the force of his advance even though he crushes me against him. I return the favor, allowing him to adjust my body to whatever position he needs in order to drill into me. I suck on his neck and squirm so that my razor-sharp nipples drag across his skin. Then I stay as still as possible while he clamps down on me, holding me in place as he fucks me, ramming his shaft into my cunt.

The room quiets, and all I can hear is him drilling into my wet channel. It squelches and flaps again and again, and then he cums.

Hot, thick seed pools in my sex as he empties into me. We hold one another, kissing and sucking and helping each other off the cliff of shattering climaxes.

"Fuck, I missed this," Draco murmurs into my lips while rolling his hips to draw out the last of his release.

We hold one another for a very long time, letting our breathing still, and I'm just about to comment on returning to our conversation when he picks up his wand from the side table and casts a Tempus.

He lets out a deep sigh and then says, "I need to go."

That is the last thing I expected to hear from him. Draco pulls from me and threads the crook of his finger into my knickers, dragging them back into place. Then he stands.

"What!?!!" I cry, falling off of him onto the leather. "Where the hell are you going now!?!!" I hurry to pull on my shorts while he cleanses us and tucks himself back in his pants. "We have so much left to discuss!!!"

Draco tilts my chin up, kisses me, then winks, "Later."

Chapter 35: The Choice

Chapter Summary

"I think I'm going mad
There's a war inside my head
My mind is a wasteland
I'm trying to make sense
No I Just can't take it no more
I think I'm going mad"
-Mad, Imaginary After

May, 1999

"I'm ready," I say, kissing him and taking the robe from his shoulders. Draco just entered the front door.

I bounce on the balls of my feet, hoping he'll agree to continue today.

"Hello to you, too," he drawls.

Before I can vanish his robe upstairs, Draco draws me back and slows my frantic movements with a scorching kiss. I relax into his pull and lower off the balls of my feet while letting out a deep sigh. His presence is always comforting.

He takes his robe from me, sends it away, and then says, "Not today, Love."

Almost a year has passed since I woke up here. It's been a beautiful year, one that started out rocky but, after Draco decided to tell me everything, has only brought us closer and closer to each other.

He kept his word and opened up to me.

Soon after deciding to be honest with me, he met me in my bedroom one morning.

I heard the gentle knock and turned to find him standing in the doorway.

"Alright, are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes!" I said, throwing my long hair into a messy bun and pulling on my cardigan.

Draco looked unsure but responded, "Will you join me downstairs then?"

He led me to an empty office—well, more like a small library. Bookshelves lined the walls, and there was a desk, a comfortable sitting area, two oversized armchairs, and a couch. In the corner stood a spiral staircase that led to the second story, where there was another level of bookshelves and a small walkway circling the room with an iron railing. Behind the desk stood a two-story window overlooking the gardens.

The odd thing was that the shelves were empty.

"What is this place?" I asked, stepping in and peering around in wonder. I had never seen a more beautiful office.

"This is a study that hasn't been used in a long time. I wanted you to have a place of your own so I asked the elves to clean it up for you."

"Thank you," I said with a cautious side-eye. I loved the space, but my trust in Draco was still new.

Picking up on my hesitation, he explained further.

"Hermione, our love story is very powerful, but also very complicated. I'm going to tell you every last detail, but it isn't going to happen in one day. It's going to take time and I'm going to tell you slowly so that you have a chance to process everything."

While ominous sounding, I liked that Draco was taking things seriously and not trying to hide anything anymore.

"Okay, I can live with that." I hugged my chest and stared at him with furrowed brows.

Draco held his hand out to me, and when I cautiously took it, he led me to the armchairs. We both chose one.

"There aren't any books," I noted the obvious.

"No there aren't. As you've seen, our library has everything you could want to read and plenty of space to add more. I cleared everything from these shelves so that you could bring in what you wanted as we discuss matters. I imagine you will end up researching or referencing items as we move along. You can keep your things in here."

Shifting into my seat to get comfortable, I considered Draco's plan. I liked that idea.

"Also," he interrupted my thoughts by reaching for my hand. I smiled at how he stared at our fingers, running his thumb over my knuckles.

Then he continued.

"I'd like the time we spend together reviewing our story, to stay in here." He summoned a cup of Jasmine tea and a biscuit, then handed them to me. The pair was delicious. "I want this place to be as comfortable as possible for you, because some of what I tell you won't be easy to accept."

Sipping my tea, I thought about all he was telling me and how careful and intentional he was. It made me feel more at ease and safe.

"Okay." I set down my cup. "I'm ready."

Draco took a deep breath and then agreed, "Okay."

Now, standing in the atrium together, I feel the wind knocked from my sails. Draco looks like his decision is final, but I don't understand. I've handled everything he has told me so far. I don't know why the next part of the story is so much weightier.

He stalks to the dining room, leaving me behind, and I feel another punch to my gut.

Draco is acting so strange. I follow in his wake, stopping at the French doors to see what's happening before I enter.

Peering in, I find Draco standing at the door to the kitchen, holding it open and talking to the elves.

"I'm back and I'd like dinner served earlier tonight. I'm —" he pauses, pinching the bridge of his nose. "—I'm tired."

"Of course, Master Draco," Millie squeaks.

I step further into the room and see it's just the two of them.

"Today is hard for you, Millie knows. I made your favorite—roast chicken and root vegetables!"

Draco rubs the back of his neck. "Thanks, Millie," he offers, then turns and looks surprised to see me listening in.

Standing against the wall with my hands behind my back, I try again. "Draco, I've been waiting for weeks. It's *past* time. Why are you so hesitant to share the next part of our story?"

He meets me at the door and brushes my hair over my shoulder. I lean into his hand on my cheek and enjoy the warm feeling.

When he talks, his voice is rough, "Hermione, tonight is the anniversary of your accident." He kisses my forehead and then places both hands on my shoulders, steadying me. "I'm sorry, but I'm not feeling up to it."

I take a step back in shock. I knew I had been here nearly a year, but I hadn't thought about the fact that we were nearing the actual day I lost all my memories. Of course, this day would be hard for him.

Disappointment blooms in my stomach. I understand, but I was really hoping to hear more.

I raise to my toes before kissing him slowly. Then, I try my best to comfort him. "I'm sorry, Draco. This day must be so hard for you."

My own feelings are a jumbled mess. I still don't know all of who I really was or what to grieve. All I know is the life we've built together; honestly, I love it. Of course, I want to

remember everything. And yes, there is some danger lurking beyond the Manor that Draco has yet to explain fully. But I trust that he will. He's been so forthcoming, and soon, he's going to tell me even more. Plus, in the meantime, I feel safe here. Draco insists that no one is going to hurt me.

"It's hard for both of us." He sounds weary. "All I want to do is eat and then take you to bed." Draco brings my head to his shoulder and speaks with a searing sincerity.

"I'm so grateful for what we have. Thank you for trusting me. The courage it took to extend that trust astounds me daily. I love you." He massages the knots out of my shoulders while talking. "I don't want you to feel upset that I'm grieving. You're enough. You don't need to be anything more." Then he tilts my head with a finger under my chin and captures my gaze in his pull. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes," I whisper, incredibly thankful for his thoughtfulness. "I love you, too."

Over the past year, Draco and I have spent a lot of time in my office. If he wasn't working, he was teaching me the violin there, or we were pouring over the details of my past. So far, he has shared with me everything he could about our time at Hogwarts and what happened the year after I left school.

He brought in a Pensive on our first day and tried his best to show me each moment in granular detail.

"You were born Hermione Jean Granger. You're an only child, like me, but your parents are Muggles. You didn't know that the wizarding world existed until you received your Hogwarts invitation."

"Are my parents around?" My heart started to beat in my throat. "When can I meet them?" I chewed my lip, wondering how I would handle that reunion. However, even though I was nervous, I knew in my bones that I missed them. And the idea of growing up in a Muggle family was fascinating.

"I don't know where your parents are right now," Draco said, trying to soften the blow by brushing my hair out of my eyes as he spoke. "I've tried to find them, but you sent them into hiding when the war picked up." Then he added with a sad smile, "And you're an exceptional witch. Especially so, if *I* can't locate them." My stomach fell.

"Oh, okay." Suddenly, I felt sad. I learned that I had parents. They might have been able to tell me more about Muggles and myself. But now I might never see them again.

Draco promised to bring me everything he had on their whereabouts and mentioned a few books I could pull from the library on Muggle upbringing.

Then, he shared a memory with me, starting with our first day at Hogwarts. He showed me the castle as much as he could—the classrooms, dining hall, and grounds. However, I could only take so much because my first trip into his memories caused me to buckle over in pain with a horrific headache.

"Don't try to picture what happened. Just allow me to show you," Draco said that day, handing me a pain potion and running a cool cloth over my forehead."

I was antsy. Draco showed me memories from our childhood, but I wanted to hear more about when we were together more recently or about the final battle where the accident occurred. As soon as I had some frame of reference to what the castle looked like, I tried like crazy to find my own recollections.

"Draco," I said, wincing from the pain. "I know you said you would tell me everything. And I want to hear it, but don't you think we've started a little too early? I mean, I didn't think you really meant *everything*!"

He took my hand as we were leaning over the desk together, having just exited the memory. "I'm telling you everything. I'm giving you every detail so you can form your own opinion." He shifted to stand behind me and caged me in his arms. We were both still leaning against the desk, but Draco then brushed my hair over my shoulder and bent his head to suck on my neck as a delicious tension coiled between us.

We still hadn't done anything more than kiss— a fact that was starting to claw at my insides.

Once I learned how to view his memories without developing migraines, the content became more and more fascinating. Draco introduced me to my best friends, Harry Potter, and Ron Weasley. He also replayed unbelievable moments, like when he heard that I fought off a troll or found and conquered the Chamber of Secrets. The visions into my past were terrific. The only problem was that Draco and I didn't get along well in school, so all the memories were of interactions in which Draco was nasty to me: that or just ordinary classes we shared.

"*Long-molared Mudblood!?*" I frowned one day, disappointed in him. "You're not presenting yourself in a good light here."

Draco leaned back against a chair and held his arm out, gesturing towards the Pensive. "I'm not trying to make myself look good. I'm trying to help you understand the truth."

My love for him grew deeper that day.

He was able to show me what the common rooms looked like, but only Slytherin. So that's when I added the first book to my shelves, *Hogwarts: a History*. I was happy to read about the Gryffindor common room, girls' dormitories, and so much more. It helped create an even fuller picture than I saw in the Pensive.

Eventually, we started viewing the memories together on the couch, which made my desire feel like my skin was burning. It was so insistent.

And then, shortly after that, we finally made love for the first time.

Draco carried me upstairs and set me down on our bed, undressing me slowly and taking me with such devotion in his gaze that the memory still makes me blush.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

We were naked, and he was stretched out over me, holding his weight on his elbows. He brushed his fingers over my curls and waited for me to answer.

"I'm sure," I mewled and then sucked in a tight breath as he pressed his way into my channel. It hurt initially, probably because we hadn't slept together in so long. But Draco was tender and considerate, talking me through the pain.

"Shh, you're okay. Take a deep breath and just relax."

Then he coaxed me into an earth-shattering orgasm.

Over the many months he spent telling our story, we covered the growing war and our respective parts in it.

Several times, I asked, "When did we start dating?" or, "How did we start dating if we were on opposite ends of this fight?" or, "So, when did things change for us? When did you stop hating me?"

And, every time, Draco would kiss me and reply, "I'm getting there. Just be patient."

Then, one night, he showed me when he received his brand from Voldemort. It was a horrific memory, clouded by Draco's fear and shock. The act was excruciatingly painful, and reliving it was tough on Draco. It made me sick to my stomach. After he showed me, he asked for some alone time, and I ached for the childhood ripped from him. He didn't come to bed until very late that night. When he finally laid his head on the pillow, I rolled over and then slid down his body to wrap my lips around his cock.

The feel of his fingers clutching my hair was all I needed to know how much he appreciated the distraction. He held me incredibly close that night as we fell asleep, and I comforted him by telling him how appreciative I was of him and how good of a person I knew him to be. I shared that feeling that much pressure to save his family must have been terrifying.

That was the first night he told me he loved me, not that we loved each other, or blah, blah, we used to love —. But he loved, *me* who I was at that very moment.

Draco decided to focus on my journey and put his storyline on hold, instead piecing together my time on the run after our sixth year. He knew that I traveled the countryside in hiding with Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, searching for Horcruxes—a dark magic that caused me to have nightmares for weeks.

There was only one event he left out.

He told me about being held captive at the Manor and how we escaped. But he did something different when sharing the story with me that day. He asked me to trust him and told me he would show me that memory later.

"Is that when we got together?" I whispered after hearing what happened.

"No, not then."

Our process of piecing together my story went well until we reached the last month before the accident when Draco clammed up. He found it hard to continue and asked me to give him some time. I still had yet to hear about what he was doing while I was on the run, and I was deadly curious, but he said it was very complicated.

That was over a month ago, and other than mentioning that I would need to prepare for what he would share next, he didn't elaborate.

Millie leaving the breakfast tray in our bedroom wakes me the next morning. After eating last night, Draco took me to bed, and I did my best to help him forget. I straddled his hips and

rode his cock until he was a pool of arousal underneath me. Then, right before he flooded me with his cum, he flipped me over and slammed into me while holding my leg to his shoulder and cuffing my throat. The display of control did sinful things to me. I found comfort in his strong embrace, his use of my body — even the way he cast the contraceptive charm on me like always.

Draco is still sleeping, so I slide out of bed and tip-toe out of the bedroom. On my way out, I grab a cup of tea and a scone, then head to my office.

Entering the space, I smile. It has changed a lot over the past year. Where the shelves used to be empty, there are now several full rows. Maps and notes litter the desk, a violin takes pride of place on one shelf, dozens of books line the others, and a big fluffy blanket lies on the couch.

I pad in and grab the blanket to wrap myself in its warmth. Then I sink down and snuggle into the cushions. Often, I come here to reflect on what I know so far. What Draco has shared takes up a lot of mental bandwidth, and sometimes, I like to rest and consider all the connections he has drawn.

Lost in thought, I fall back asleep and wake up to Draco's hands on my shoulders and his kiss on the top of my head. I tilt back and take in his presence behind me.

"Should I be offended that you left my bed to sleep on the couch?"

"Oh, stop."

He tilts my head even further back and kisses me upside down. "You're adorable curled up in here," he hums. "Do you want me to leave so you can keep resting?"

"No, of course not. Come sit with me."

Draco rounds the couch, sits in the corner of the sectional, and pulls me into his embrace. We hold each other for a moment in contented silence.

"Draco," I eventually whisper.

He hums in response, "Hmm?"

"I'm ready."

There's a long, heavy pause.

We're both facing the window and staring at the blooming gardens. The Irises and Snowdrops dazzle in the morning light.

"I'm not really sure how to begin with the next part," he admits, running his hands up and down my arms.

I turn to face him, asking, "Why? You've told me a lot of hard stuff so far."

He shifts me back to the window and kisses my head again, saying into my hair. "Do you remember when I told you that I was going to let you build your own opinion?"

I nod.

I love this man—the way he holds me, the way he's honest and caring. I have this intense draw to him, and he never disappoints. He's always considerate. That, and he's incredibly hot.

I sink further into his hold, enjoying the weight of his arm over my shoulders.

"Up until this point, I've been telling the story from your perspective."

I make to turn around and object, but Draco holds me still.

"I know," he acquiesces. "I've told you about my experience being inducted into the Death Eaters. I even told you about my mission to murder Dumbledore."

A shiver runs up my spine at the memory.

Draco continues, "But all of that was to give you a clearer picture of your history." He takes a deep, steady breath and holds it for another moment of indecision before letting it out and continuing.

"I could selfishly switch to what *I* experienced and you might feel more compassion for me."

That sounds good. Of course, I want to show Draco compassion. Why wouldn't I?

"Or I could tell the rest of your story —" he pauses for a long beat and shifts his weight uncomfortably. "—and you might end up hating me."

"What!?" I whip around, unwilling to let him stop me this time.

Draco brushes my hair behind my ear and says, "Both stories are equally true. They're just different sides of a coin. And I think you should choose."

"Why would my story make me hate you?" I ask with narrowed eyes, feeling the pinpricks of anxiety run up my spine. I haven't felt them since last year.

"Hermione, we married on Grasmoor one week before the final battle and when we did we were madly in love, I promise you that."

I freeze. "We were only married for a week before my accident?"

Draco's face falls. He looks sad and conciliatory. "That's right." He threads his fingers with mine and runs his thumb over my knuckle. "But, it's complicated."

"Draco, when did we start dating?" I ask again, leaning into the words and glaring at him, hoping to convey my concern. In our timeline, we've made it up to roughly a month before the final battle. Now, I realize that something is very wrong unless he left out significant parts of the story. "I want you to tell me right now."

He stands and tucks me back into my blanket, then crouches down so we're at eye level. His eyes are deep waves of rolling emotions.

"That's the choice."

I rear back, upset by where this conversation is heading. Is he really going to evade my question again?

"I want you to think carefully about your answer." He gently grasps my chin and runs his pointer finger over my cheek, offering whatever comfort I will allow him to share. "Do you want to hear when we started dating? Or do you want to hear about your accident? I will tell you both. But the order is important."

Ice is in my veins as he stands, then kisses my head and walks to the door. It shuts with a click, and I'm left to mull over what this all means.

My body feels heavy, and my breathing is labored as I reflect for hours. I stare out the large window and watch as the shadows move across the garden, indicating the passing of time.

He told me almost my entire life story, and we haven't gotten together yet. There isn't any time left in this tale before my accident. Did we really only date for three weeks before marrying? If so, we hardly had any time to get to know one another before my memories were wiped. How can we have formed such a strong bond so quickly?

The two paths loom over me. Do I want to hear that we dated for such a short time? Is that what might make me hate him? Does he think I won't trust him if I find out how new our relationship was before I lost my mind?

The other option is also one of my deepest curiosities— what really happened to me at the final battle?

After several more restless hours, I ask Millie to tell Draco I've made my decision. He returns to find me chewing my nails and hugging my knees to my chest. He stands before me, leaning his back on the desk and holding his weight on his arms. He's stone as he awaits my judgment.

Draco said *my story* might make me hate him, and that was the deciding factor. I want all the information. I want to hear the worst of it and rip off the proverbial band-aid.

I sit up taller as Draco holds his breath.

"Tell me about my accident."

I watch his face fall, but I can't turn back now. So I continue, "How did I lose my memories?"

Draco's shoulders sag, and he hangs his head. His low voice is chilling when he speaks.

"I tricked you into meeting me in the Forbidden Forest,"

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, I want him to stop.

No!

But I made my choice, and Draco isn't trying to look good. He's telling me the truth.

He's still talking as my heart hammers.

"— brought you to the Dark Lord, and then,—"

Oh gods. "Stop!" I cry.

I can't hear it.

I need to make him stop.

He's about to ruin everything.

Desperate anxiety clenches my heart as I clutch my knees and brace for impact, sobbing.

"I obliterated you."

Chapter 36: See

Chapter Summary

"Well you got your reasons
And you got your lies
And you got your manipulations
They cut me down to size
Sayin' you love but you don't
You give your love but you won't"
-If you could only see, Tonic

Chapter Notes

Hello, folks!

Okay so this is the second of three chapters in a row of 1999. I hope you enjoy. I am toying with the idea of posting three chapters this week, so keep up the comments! =)
You all are the best!

May 1999

"How could you!?"

My throat is hoarse with the terror that I feel. My entire body clenches with fear as I stare at the man that I've given myself to for a year.

I trusted this man when he told me I was safer in his home than anywhere else.

This man wedged his way into my heart, past my hesitation and doubts.

I've let him take me with my wrists above my head, clasped in his vice-like grip as he ruts into me. It felt right under his weight.

Visions of Draco moving back into our bedroom and cautious authority on his face flash in my mind.

Visions of him holding me as I watched memory after memory, all while he knew where they led, spring forth next.

He's had me under his control for a year!

I can't breathe.

I clutch at my chest as I hear Draco in the distance calling my name.

The knitted design of my sweater rubs beneath my fingers. The rib stitch is my only comfort as I melt down. Then, my assailant is in front of me, crouching to force me to look at him. He reaches out his hand.

And, I lose it.

"Get away from me!!!" I slap him away and clammer over the couch, screaming.

"H—How could you!?! " I yell. "How could you do that!!? How could you keep me here afterwards, and convince me to love you!" I run to the door. "You sick Bastard!"

Draco beats me to my destination. He does something he rarely does: He Apparates inside the Manor to block my way.

"Calm down, love, or you're going to pass out." Draco holds out his hand in caution but refuses to let me by.

"Go to Hell!" I screech to a halt and fumble my wand out of my back pocket to point at his face.

"Get out of my way!!!" I demand, but Draco doesn't budge. *"How could you!?!"*

"Hermione, I'm sorry!" His deep voice cracks as he runs his hand through his hair. "It's so complicated. Please, let me show you." Draco attempts to place his hand on my lower back and directs me to the couch, but I'm not having it.

"Get out!!!" I snap, shrugging him off.

I can't stand the look of his face. I need him to get away from me. I have to develop a plan, but my mind is racing with fear and anxiety. I can't think straight.

"Okay," he says through clenched teeth, trying to appease me. "Okay, I'm going. Just, here!" Draco grasps my wrist.

"No, stop!" I holler, yanking my arm back. However, Draco's hold is unshakable. He wrenches my fist open and shoves a small glass phial into my hand.

"See for yourself. Here." Draco barks orders at me, dropping my arm as I shoot backward from him. "I'll leave." He reaches behind himself to pull open the door. "Please, just watch!"

Then he's gone.

I try the handle, realizing I want to be as far from this place as possible. The world is crashing down around me, and I have no idea what's real anymore. It's devastating. I need to run. I have to get out of here.

But the knob doesn't turn. The betrayal burns in my chest.

My anxiety shoots through the roof. I'm trapped!!

My vision blurs as the panic starts to take over. I can't catch my breath.

Pop!

"Mrs. Yous okay!"

"Get away from me!!" I rage, wrapping my arms around my head and sinking to the ground.

"Yous, okay," Millie says again, holding her hands out to me so as not to frighten me.

I'm trapped, I'm trapped! He did this to me, and there's nowhere to go!

"Millie!" I wail as the dam of fear and anger subsides to devastating sadness. "Millie!" I choke out again. "I'm not okay. Oh gods!"

The little elf runs to me and throws her arms over me to shield me from my grief.

"Shh! Mrs. Shh!" She hugs me tighter. "There is more to the story. Yous need to keep listening."

I hear her words of comfort while staring at the door with disdain. I'm unsure how, but I can picture Draco leaning against the wall next to the door. He's fisting his wand in his tightly crossed arms and hanging his head. He's wrecked, and it causes my blood to boil.

He doesn't have the right to be upset!!

"There's more to the story, Mrs. There's more," she soothes, trying to bring me down from my ledge of hysteria.

"How!? What else could matter!?" I hiccup, swiping at my tears. "Tell me he's lying!"

I lift my wet eyes, hoping she will give me some indication that this is an evil trick, but she doesn't.

So, I drop my head again, watching fat tears splash on the floor.

The next day, Draco knocks on my office door.

I'm staring at the desk where the empty phial lays, discarded and mistreated. Small remnants of memory mist leak out on the wood. My eyes are dry and blurry as I sit on the floor with my back to the couch, hugging my knees.

I watched.

Of course, I did.

I had to. Something in my core urged me to learn more and understand more. I guess I've never been one to leave a problem unsolved when additional information was at my disposal.

But now, I have different concerns.

"Hermione? Can I come in?" Draco's voice rumbles through the room. It's so low and quiet.

He enters and stands beside the couch, staring down at me when I don't say anything.

We sit in tense silence for what feels like an eternity.

The memory started in the castle where the battle raged, and spells and debris flew everywhere. Draco rounded a corner and ran directly into me. I felt his relief wash over him as he grabbed my upper arm.

In the scene his clothes were singed and he looked like he had just escaped a fire. But, a determined energy was pouring off of him.

"Let me go!" I yelled, shoving my wand in his face. "Malfoy, get the fuck off of me!"

Draco pulled me into an alcove, hiding us from view, and sneered, "She's in the Forbidden Forest. She needs to see you."

"Who?" I asked. But Draco only responded with a condescending stare.

"I'll see you there. Don't follow me. I'm going to her now." Draco left me and headed back into the melee as my memory-self stood behind in confusion.

Continuing to observe, I ran behind him through the memory, wondering what just happened. He said that he tricked me into the Forbidden Forest. So, who was *she*, and why would I have been so gullible to follow him? We obviously still hated each other. That interaction just confirmed it.

What occurred next in the recollection stunned me into silence. I watched as Draco met up with me again, dragged me into the air, and kissed me. Confused, I tried my best to piece everything together and understand. I watched us talk until *I* met them in the woods.

There were two of me there that night.

I watched the rest of the events in shock, barely grasping all the tiny details. There was a centaur, Death Eaters, a clueless Harry Potter, and me. I was everywhere, orchestrating the night as Draco followed along, furious.

Sitting on the floor in the office after watching, I'm gutted. I can't process it anymore.

"What was that?" I eventually ask.

Draco doesn't move as he intones, "The final battle." He's still standing above me, waiting, deciding what to do next.

"W—which Hermione was I?" I croak.

I know the answer, but a part of me wants to believe differently. If there were two of us, I want to be the one Draco passionately kissed. I want to be the one he begged to stay.

"You were the one that I brought from the castle." He sounds sad and haunted.

Draco stares at his shoes. The tension between us is so tight it hurts.

He was right that the story was complicated. I'm still struggling to understand the involvement of time travel.

Tears begin to fall again as I whimper, "When was she from?"

"2004"

Draco's short responses cause my skin to crawl.

My voice cracks as I ask my next question. "How long were you together?"

He drags in a deep breath and then lets it out, saying, "Ten months."

I'm no longer afraid of him. I'm devastated. As confusing as the memory was, it helped to confirm that Draco was trying his best to protect me. It showed that he was telling me the truth all along, but the truth is awful.

"You don't even like me."

I hate that I sound so wounded. But, I am. The man I thought was my husband didn't even tolerate me well as we trudged through the trees together that night. And then, after she left, he wiped my memories in a rage— as she asked him to do. All he was concerned about was her. Her safety. Her plans. *Her*.

I'm hollow, realizing that I was only ever a means to an end. And now Draco is keeping me safe so that he can reunite with her.

Draco grabs me from the floor. I don't have a chance to protest, and I'm not sure how to react at this point anyway. I feel like such an idiot, thinking he cared about me and that I was worthy of his love.

He holds me to his chest with one hand on the back of my head, crushing me into his shoulder.

"You're right. I didn't like you."

He rubs his thumb through my curls, trying to soothe me. "I won't lie to you."

His words are a knife to my already fractured heart. I can't take anymore. Why was I so insistent about hearing the rest of this awful tale? I want to be back in bed with him, three days ago, happily unaware.

Then he rears back and captures my chin, forcing me to look him in the eyes.

"But now I *love* you!"

I can't understand anything he says anymore. I'm so tired and confused.

I try to shake from his hold, but Draco smashes his lips to mine, underscoring his truth with his intensity. He holds the back of my head, and I melt into him. I kiss him back, wishing that everything was real, and that he did care for me. But I'm the swotty brat. I'm the annoying Order member he had no intention of saving.

Then Draco pulls back, holding me at arm's length as I catch my breath. "Listen to me!" He demands, drawing me out of my grief-stricken stupor. He forces my attention back on his eyes as he attempts, with all of his being, to convince me of his honesty.

"I've loved you from several time periods," he insists. I drop my eyes back to the floor, and he grabs my chin again, forcing me to listen. "Stop it. Pay attention to me, damn it!" His silver eyes taunt me. I've always cherished the way that they looked at me.

"I love you more than life itself," he continues. "—and one thing I learned this year is that you are you in every point in history, just with different memories."

His ferocity breaks through my haze, and I finally take in what he is telling me.

"And I love *you*!"

It takes several months, but we eventually find our rhythm again. My self-confidence was already low due to my accident, and the revelation of what really happened that night didn't help. But Draco is sure and steady. He lets me process my feelings however I need to.

Over the weeks, I wanted to be left alone some nights and chose to curl up in my office, listening to music and trying to make sense of everything. Draco always left me in peace when that happened, even though I could tell he wanted to comfort me. Instead, Millie hovered, making sure I didn't need anything. The two of them were completely obvious, but the set-up worked.

On other nights, I needed to feel Draco's reassurance. I needed him to remind me that I was good enough, worthy enough of his love. And he was happy to oblige. He would scoop me into his arms and hold me while insisting, "I love every part of you. I love you as you are, and I love who you become. You're it for me, Hermione." Then, he would stretch out behind my naked body as we lay in bed. He'd pull my leg over his and enter me from behind, running his fingers over my sex and sucking on my neck. "I love you. You're mine," he would repeat as he spilled into me.

I ask him to hold off on sharing any more memories. I know he wants to tell me the rest of the story now that I have seen the worst, but I need to sit with the news I have for now. Draco follows my lead, and instead, we spend more evenings with him standing behind me, adjusting my fingers on my violin and instructing me on how to pull the right tone from its core.

I pour my efforts into perfecting my skills and surprise myself when I realize I have a natural artistry with the instrument.

Draco's life is stressful. He opens up to me a little more about the horrible things Voldemort makes him do, like enforcing unjust laws or hunting down criminals.

One of the worst aspects of his job is that he has to oversee the distribution of female property to Pureblood wizards. There's an entire industrial complex with sales and Muggleborn witches being trained and prepared for service. Draco has to make sure the operation is running smoothly. He is even in charge of tracking down witches if they happen to escape. It's devastatingly awful for him to do to avoid punishment and for me to reconcile.

When I have enough time to reflect, I steel myself to ask, "Draco? Are you still working to end Voldemort's reign? I mean, have you been trying to destroy those Horcruxes?"

He stiffens and then responds with a compassionate but severe and unyielding directive. "I am doing what I can. But, it is incredibly dangerous work." Then, he sharpens his tone. He grabs my chin and insists, "You will have *nothing* to do with it."

All of that is heavy and nearly incapacitating at times. So when he comes home at night we try our best to sink into one another and find our peace.

When not in bed together, we keep our minds busy with music, potion-crafting, or herbology. One night, I even put on a small concert for Draco and Millie, and we all laugh after they give me raucous applause. It lasts a little too long, causing me to quip, "I wasn't *that* good."

"See," he says one day, wrapping his arms around me from behind as I lean over my desk, trying to suss out a particularly tricky bit of Arithmancy.

"What?" I ask, tilting my head back to kiss him.

"You've always done that." He taps my nose.

I turn to face him. "What have I always done?"

Draco draws me into his arms, kisses me, and then says, "You've always chewed on your bottom lip when you're really focused on something." I furrow my brows and place my weight on one foot. "You've done that in every time period. I told you, you're you."

Scowling, I grump, "Thank goodness you love me for the way I chew my lip."

"Don't get bratty with me, witch. I'm just trying to let you know what I've noticed."

There are many moments like that as time passes. Draco kisses my temple one afternoon while I'm playing with a set of blue flames I conjured. "See," is all he says. Or when I rail at him for not letting me past the garden gates. "See," he laughs.

"What?! Am I trying to escape the Manor grounds in every timeline? I'm not sure that is something you should laugh about." I snap, brushing my hair out of my eyes.

Draco stands and threads his hand through my hair, holding me by the back of my neck. "Well, I don't know about that, but your righteous indignation is always cute." Then he takes my breath away with a passionate kiss. Afterward, he leaves me to stalk up the steps.

"So, I can go for a walk?" I call out as he departs.

"Not a chance," he orders over his shoulder.

Then, after about six months I meet him outside on the patio next to the kitchen doors. He's at a café table, reading the *Daily Prophet*, and happy to have me interrupt. He sets down the paper as I meet him. I stand beside him as he sits and wrap my arms around his neck.

"I'm ready," I say, then I watch his eyes soften with relief. He stands, smiles, and then guides me back into the house without saying a word.

Chapter 37: A Love Story

Chapter Summary

"You know our love would be tragic (oh, yeah)
So you don't pay it, don't pay it no mind, mind, mind
We live with no lies
Hey, hey, and you're my favorite kind of night"
-Earned it, The Weekend

Chapter Notes

You are all so lovely with your comments. I can't say thank you enough. It is not only motivating, but it is also so helpful in getting more readers to pay attention to my pieces. You all rock!

I love your speculating and sympathizing with these two. This story has been really fun to write and these final chapters were especially meaningful. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Happy Reading!!

December 2000

"Draco?" I ask, peeking my head into his study.

He sets down his correspondence and lifts his gaze. "Hey." Draco's smile doesn't quite meet his eyes. I know he's pleased to see me, but his work is haunting.

I steady my nerves and step into the dark room. The fire behind his desk is crackling, and the sconces on his bookshelves are glowing. The room looks cozy despite the terrible tasks Draco has to coordinate here.

He pushes back from the desk as I stand by the door, ordering, "Come in."

I cross the room and kiss him but don't curl into his lap like he wants. Instead, I perch myself on his desk with my legs dangling and hands clinging to the edge. Draco's brows furrow in confusion, and he sits up straighter. He can sense that something is up.

It took a while, but he eventually reached the point in our story where he described our bond.

"That's why I can sense your emotions!" I said that afternoon, brushing my hair off my forehead and staring into space.

"Yes, and why we can't get enough of one another," he hummed, trailing his fingers along my collarbone. Then, pausing, he adopted a more serious tone, "I think time travel messed with our bond." Noticing my confused look, he clarified. "I think it duplicated or concentrated it somehow." Then, he pulled my hand into the air between us and placed my small palm to his. He ghosted our fingertips over one another, eliciting a scandalous purring in my core. "Other marriage bonds aren't as intense."

Back in his office, Draco scowls, "What is it?"

"There seem to be some missing books in our library." I attempt to start small. I hope to get him to help me; I know he doesn't want to.

Draco's mouth flattens into a frown. "Is there?" He shifts his weight. "Well, tell me what you need, and I'll ask Millie to make a trip to Diagon Alley."

He's on to me and forcing my hand. But I don't care. We need to talk about the time-traveling elephant in the room.

"Okay, great! I wrote it all down." I shove my list at his chest.

He eyes it but doesn't take it.

"We need, *The Temporal Adventures in Wizarding* by Elspeth Pendragon, *Chronicles of the Tempus Society* by Barnabas Pritchard, *Wizards and the Sands of Time* by Seraphina Spellwright, *The Timekeepers' Codex* by Thaddeus Evergreen, and *Tales from the Temporal Nexus* by Cassandra Quicksilver."

Draco uses his forearm to brush me off his desk and picks his letter back up.

"Get out of here, witch. I need another hour before I'll be ready for dinner. I'll see you then."

Catching myself and stumbling to stand, I drop the list on his desk and slap my hand on it, pushing it to him. "Sure, I'll leave this with you. I want the books by tomorrow. I'll tell Millie."

"Hermione —" he growls.

Draco grabs the list, crumples it, and tosses it into the fire. "We're done with time travel and you know that! I'm not entertaining this conversation."

"Well, too bad for you, I am!" I yank open the drawer by my leg and pull out a sheet of parchment. Then I reach across him to swipe his quill from his ink well. Usually, stretching out like this in front of my intensely concentrated partner would lead to something much more enjoyable for both of us. However, this has gone on too long.

I tap the quill a few times, then hunch over my sheet of paper, recreating the list.

Draco vanishes my parchment and quill, slams his chair backward, and stands.

"Leave it!" he orders, heading for the atrium.

Once I was finally ready to hear the rest of our love story, it took another year to parse it all out. We took our time going over what Draco experienced, this time focusing on his perspective. I was handling everything okay until he showed me the memory of the night he accidentally uncovered her brand.

"What!?" I railed, pulling from the memory to gape at Draco in shock. "She was lying the whole time!?"

"Yes, you were," Draco confirmed.

"How could she do that to you!?"

Draco's lips twitched in a lopsided smile. He was pleased with my reaction. "Hmm, how could you?"

I squirmed under his scrutiny.

"That's enough for tonight," he stated. His voice was low and dripped with desire. Then he dragged me upstairs to take me with a fierce possession.

We continued the next evening because I was anxious to see how we recovered after that bombshell. But Draco only showed me the immediate aftermath.

He took a very long time to walk me through all the next steps that led to the two of us arriving at our vacation home. I felt particularly proud when I learned that I saved him on that mountaintop, realizing that I *am* a badass!

"Where are they?" I asked when he mentioned the memories the future-me left him when she headed to Grasmoor.

Shifting in his seat, Draco growled, "Locked away in the safe in my office."

I stood up straight after leaning over my desk to watch the events in the Pensive. "Can I see them?"

"No."

Draco didn't want to show me what he saw. It took months for him to be willing to let me view them.

"You remember how well it went when I showed you what happened at the final battle. These memories are just as bad and they aren't even accurate."

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

When I finally broke him down, I watched and needed several days alone. But Draco was less willing to give me space.

"Hermione," he said, cupping my cheeks in his hands. "This is why I didn't want to show you. Those memories are awful, but, I decided two years ago to change the future. They won't end up occurring!"

"But!?" I asked, trying to pull from his hold.

"No," he held steady. "I'm not letting you sink back into another bout of depression. Those fucking memories aren't coming true!"

As he storms out of his study, I follow Draco to the atrium and cry, "She said that you had to mistreat me or time would be disturbed and we would never meet!"

Continuing to walk away from me, Draco demands, "That's enough!"

He summons his robe and heads for the front door, doing anything to get away from me. I try to stop him, but reaching into my back pocket, I realize I left my wand upstairs.

"Stop, Draco!" I holler, "We need to talk about this."

He doesn't stop.

Just before he grabs the door handle, I dart my eyes around the room, looking for anything that could help, and do the first thing that comes to mind. I rip off my shoe, hopping as I follow in his wake. Then I chuck it at a nearby suit of armor. I cheer when I successfully knock the silver staff from its grasp and send it crashing to the ground. Just like I hoped, the trajectory is perfect. As it falls, it lodges itself between the handles of the two doors, locking them shut.

Draco screeches to a halt and then whips around, pointing toward the now-barricaded door.

"What kind of *Muggle shit* was that!?"

"Yes!" I throw my fist into the air and smile. I can't believe I got that to work!

He stares at me in wonder, brushing his hair out of his face, and then says, "You should've been a ruddy Chaser!" his exasperation breaks the tension, and suddenly we're both laughing.

Draco stomps over, hoists me into his arms, and wraps my legs around his middle.

This is better!

I thread my arms around his neck and play with the back of his hair. "Well, don't run away from me and I won't have to chase you," I tease, then dip my head to kiss him. As I do, my curls fall over my shoulder, and Draco hums.

The door rattles as Draco turns and presses me against it, pinning me between him and the wood. He flattens one hand out next to my head and uses the other to grasp my hair. "I've been chasing you my entire adult life." He nips at my lips and presses his length between my legs, causing my panties to moisten.

"I don't know about that," I pant as he unbuttons my jeans. "I'm pretty sure I'm the one always locked behind doors."

I suck in a tight breath when Draco creates just enough room between our heated bodies to shove his hand into my pants and slip between my wet lips. He teases my clit, and I'm putty in his hands.

I gasp one more time at the silky feeling of his fingers and then whisper into his neck, "Take me upstairs."

Several hours later, I'm lying naked with my head hanging over the side of the bed—upside down and spent. Draco lifts his face from my sex and wipes his forearm across his mouth before coaxing his way into my quim for the third time.

"You're insatiable!" I yell, exhausted. "Aren't you tired yet?"

"Never."

Draco spills into me one last time, then drags my limp body to the head of the bed to hold me as we come down from our high. I rest my head on his chest, catching my breath and staring out the window. Snow is falling, making the grounds look magical.

Outside the Manor walls, the world is a nightmare, but Draco does his best to keep our home life peaceful. He says that I'm his anchor to the little that is good in his life.

I enjoy the feel of his thick fingers running through my curls and consider how deep my love for him has grown. I would do anything for this man, including saving him from himself.

"I know what you did," I sigh with a smile.

"What?" Draco's arrogant question does something to my insides that I didn't think was possible after everything he had just put me through.

"You distracted me with sex." Hugging him tighter, I snuggle into his embrace.

This is where I belong.

"Me? You started it. I'm an innocent man."

I love the sound of his light-hearted tone. I hear it so rarely.

"Sure you are," I say through tight lips.

Draco bends and kisses the top of my head, lowering his voice. "Turns out, I didn't really want to run away from you anyways."

I smack at his stomach, then stand up.

"Where are you going, witch?" Draco calls out to me as I walk to the ensuite.

After I've taken the time to freshen up and grabbed a clean pair of knickers, I throw my hair into a ponytail and climb back in bed to straddle his legs. I face him, ready to continue our conversation from earlier.

"Draco, you've told me everything now. I've seen all the memories." It's challenging to come off serious with my naked breasts on full display, but I don't care. I've trapped him here, and he's going to talk to me. "She was pretty sure that time is fixed when we were all traipsing through the forest during the final battle. We need to do more research, otherwise we're putting ourselves at risk."

He pulls in a deep sigh and lets it out again. Then, he shifts his hips so we are at eye level and tilts his forehead to mine. "Hermione —" his voice is quiet and pained. "Time cannot be fixed. There is no way in hell that I could ever abuse you like that. I love you."

My heart melts at his sincerity.

"I know that, but shouldn't we try to find out everything we can so that we know what we're dealing with?" I lift my hand to brush my fingers over his faded scar, then I raise to place a tender kiss next to it before sliding back down his body.

"I changed everything, love." he moans. "I couldn't do what you asked me to do. I didn't last a month." Draco scrunches his eyes shut at the memory of our early days together. "When I decided to tell you everything, I changed the course of history. I don't want to delve too deep into what that might mean for us." He pulls back and ghosts his thumb over my exposed nipple. "We live in a war. Something could happen at any point, I don't know how much time I'll get. I just want to enjoy the life I have with you. This life, here and now." He chokes up, adding, "I've already lost you once and needed to start over from the beginning. I don't want to lose that time together again." Then, kissing my nose, he says, "Things are good. Leave them alone."

I squirm at the delicious feel of his handling of me, then try one last time, "Okay, but let *me* do the research then. I mean it isn't only about us. What about ending the war? Shouldn't we be doing more to —" I beg.

"The answer is no." He cuts me off, suddenly stern. "Don't ask it of me again."

I hate how tormented he looks. All he's trying to do is preserve our love. How can I fault him? I lean closer and kiss Draco one more time, soothing him.

"Okay, I'll drop it."

July 2001

My fingers rock over the strings, drawing out the perfect vibrato as I stand by the tall window in my study. I'm playing my new favorite song, Barber's *Adagio*. I love the piece because it takes so much control to make it sing. The notes are long and slow. They build with an exquisite crescendo. Plus, the piece is a little sad. It's the perfect fit for my life — breathtakingly beautiful with a haunting undercurrent.

"You look gorgeous," Draco hums from his place on the couch. It's a Summer evening, and we're each lost in our thoughts while spending time together in my office. "The lighting from the window highlights you perfectly."

Draco joined me an hour ago and has been staring into the distance, listening to me play. His right ankle is resting on his left knee, and he's leaning back with his arms stretched along the top of the couch. He looks stunning as well.

"You're making me blush," I say, bringing the instrument down to my side. Then, I flip my hair over my shoulder dramatically, adding, "Plus, I know I'm hot. You don't have to tell me."

I smile as Draco huffs a laugh. Then, succumbing to the draw of the bond, I lock my violin back in its case and go sit with him. I tuck my legs under myself, cuddling into his side as he drops an arm to pull me closer.

"Did you just come in here to listen to me play?" I ask as we bathe in the soothing feel of togetherness.

"No, I wanted to stare at your shelves," Draco teases. Then, taking in the walls around him, he adds, "I'm going to need to expand this room for you soon. It didn't take you very long to fill the place."

"I guess it didn't," I say, scanning the room and taking a cleansing breath. This corner of the Manor is mine, and it's perfect. The rest of our home can feel too big and stuffy, but this room is warm and cozy. I've filled the shelves with my favorite texts and several cherished possessions. There's a set of empty beakers resting in a golden stand. They remind me of the first time we brewed together. I was so nervous to try but thrilled when I found out I was still quite skilled at potion-crafting.

A little further up the wall, there's an acrylic triptych I painted of the most beautiful collection of flowers. Draco brought them to me one evening, and they took my breath away. I had to paint them. It wasn't a stuffy bouquet with all-white roses or something that might adorn our dining table. It was wildflowers, pulled together with incredible artistry. What made the flowers even more special was that Draco told me he traveled to my childhood home to collect them and then had the elves arrange each stem with care. I wanted the flowers to last, so I painted them and even charmed the painting so that they swayed in a gentle breeze.

Cascading down from the top shelves on the second floor are several pots of Eucalyptus, a String of Pearls, and Burro's Tail, all tended to by Draco and I. Gardening has become a bit of a hobby for us, and that has extended to house plants. These are some of my favorites.

Draco kisses me, then says, "In all honesty, I do have a reason for joining you." He leans to draw my hand to his mouth and lightly kisses the inside of my wrist. "I mean, other than just wanting to be with you always."

A shiver runs up my spine as I ask, "Oh yeah? What's up?"

His eyes smolder as he raises his gaze to mine and sighs, "Happy Anniversary, love."

That is the last thing I thought he would say. Draco and I haven't ever celebrated our anniversary before. I'm not even sure what this date represents. I thought we married on May 7th.

"What?"

Draco knows that his celebration is confusing me, so he explains, "Today is the day you dropped into my life — the day you went from my swotty classmate to my hot wife."

I lower my eyes. Draco's words are sweet, but I have complicated feelings about what day we should celebrate. I don't remember the day we got married, and it was a bittersweet day for Draco because it was the beginning of the end of his time with the future me. I sure as hell don't want to celebrate the day that I woke up here because those first few weeks were confusing and scary.

I guess this day is as good as any.

"Plus," Draco keeps talking, knowing I'm lost in my head. "It's really just an excuse for me to give you this."

He waves his wand and conjures a box. It's wrapped in purple paper with shimmering stars decorating it.

"Really?" I smile. "This isn't fair I don't have anything to give you."

"It's fine, Hermione. Just open it."

I start to pull the wrapping paper from the gift but then stop. Looking around the shelves again, I joke, "It better not be a book."

Draco laughs, then drops his voice and says, "Just open it, witch."

I carefully remove the sparkling paper from the box and then open the lid. Darting my eyes back and forth, I lift the object from the velvet lining, pulling my lips back in an awkward grimace.

"Um, thank you. It's lovely!" I say, trying not to hurt his feelings, because it's the thought that counts. However, my stomach turns in embarrassment. It's a book. *Travel Adventures in the American Northeast*. "I'll enjoy learning about a new travel destination." I lift my eyes to his and ask weakly, "I've never been here before, right?"

My sexy, arrogant husband offers a knowing smile, then clarifies, "It's a portkey."

The air in the room seems to freeze with jittering intensity. My mind slows to a crawl, and my breath catches in my throat. I stare at him in shock, blinking, with my mouth wide open. Then pure delight warms me from the inside.

"W—what!?"

Draco bends to take my remaining breath away with a kiss. My heartbeat flutters as I let loose sweet, happy tears.

"It's a portkey," he reiterates for the benefit of my sluggish mind.

Nearly all of my memories are boxed within the walls of this Manor. They move back and forth from our bedroom to the dining hall, study, greenhouse, potions lab, and library. I have only been out of the Manor twice, and that was when Draco gave in to my pleas and brought me to the stone vacation home that I saw in his memories. We traveled by Floo, which caused Draco to be surly and stern both times — worried that my instatement as a Malfoy wouldn't be strong enough to cloak my magical signature for anyone watching the network. I basked in the time away, but both trips were cut short when Draco couldn't stand the anxiety the visits caused.

"How?" I breathe.

Portkey creation is limited by law to only occur within the walls of the Ministry, and even then, the process is scrutinized. There should be no way for Draco to have secured an unregistered one.

He rubs his thumb over the back of my hand, assuring me it's real. "I paid a good deal of money to a black market dealer who charges the items in Tokyo and then smuggles them into Europe."

I pull back. "You trust that the dealer won't talk?"

Draco doesn't answer right away. He stares at our hands, then admits, "There isn't a trail back to us. I made sure of it."

As I consider that part of this equation, we're both silent for several minutes. I don't know if Draco was Polyjuiced when he met with the dealer, if he Obliviated them afterward, or... But I decide to go with Polyjuice in order to make myself feel better.

When I've worked out that guilt, I ask, "Where are we going?"

"Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. It's remote, and quaint. You'll like it. I promise."

"Honestly, you could take me to a Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, and I'd be happy!" I stand, and Draco follows my lead. "Are we going now? We're going now, right? I'll go pack!"

But before I can walk away, Draco reaches out and pulls me back.

"We're going now," he states, then taps the book, causing it to glow. "I already packed our things."

To my great excitement, Draco and I spend three idyllic weeks in the historic town between three states in the U.S. We wear Muggle clothes and stay at a tiny bed & breakfast that overlooks the rivers that cut into the surrounding mountains.

With no plans, we drink lattes at local shops in the morning, then hike the many paths available. They take us over old train bridges, rocks, and gullies. We eat crabcakes and chips with Old Bay seasoning and laugh at how fast we become proper Americans. Then, we hold each other, watching the sunset from our rooftop deck each night.

The setting is perfect for me because of all the open space. There are mountains, trees, and rivers, and nothing is surrounded by a wall or a gate. I'm free for the first time that I remember.

Draco seems lighter as we vacation together. He's finally able to relax, knowing that we are no longer in Europe. He doesn't even force us to disguise ourselves, which I find shocking.

"I want to see how happy you are, not some transfiguration of my wife," he professes, and I fall a little bit more in love with him at those words.

However, Draco draws the line when I ask to pick up our take away by myself one night. I love being with him, but I want to see what it feels like to be alone.

"Nope," he is quick to shoot down the idea. "Nice try though."

On our last night, we don't go to sleep. I beg Draco to bring blankets up to the roof and stay there all night so that I can breathe in the fresh air for a little bit longer. He kisses the bittersweet tears from my eyes and promises to bring me back.

"Shh, we can recharge the portkey and come back. Don't cry, love."

He pulls me into his arms, rests my head on his shoulder, and I fall asleep in the crisp, open air.

March 2002

Draco has me by the back of the neck and is dragging me down the hall to our bedroom like a misbehaving puppy. He slams open the door and throws me in.

"Are you fucking kidding me!?"

He's furious. Anger pours off of him as he slams the door behind us and throws up several silencing wards.

I right myself and straighten out my outfit, trying to pull together some composure since I was basically just brought to task.

"I can't bite my tongue all the time," I yell, throwing my hand out to the door and pointing back in the direction we just came.

"You tried to steal my wand and hex Nott. *Damn it*, Hermione! What were you thinking!?"

I stomp to the closet, dragging the gray fabric over my head, then crumple the dress in my anger and chuck it to the ground. Now, wearing only my black lace knickers and bra, I wrap my hair in a messy bun. My hands are still securing my hair on the top of my head when I spit, without any shame at all, "I was thinking that someone should murder those disgusting pigs!"

I yank a bathrobe off a nearby hanger and wrap the belt around my waist. "Did you hear him boasting about what he did to that poor witch!?"

Draco is standing behind me, watching me change with fire in his eyes.

"Of course I did," he roars. "They're repulsive. That's why we do this!"

I push past him and head to the bedroom to grab my book and calm my nerves. Then I plop down on the chair by the window. Draco follows, loosening his tie, and grabs a drink from the bar cart. He knocks back a sip and then continues yelling at me.

"What did you think was going to happen? Did you think it would be believable that my unarmed captive, just happened to steal *my* wand?" He crosses the room to tower over me, but I vehemently ignore him. "I'm Draco fucking Malfoy!" He growls at my self-righteous, upturned chin. "Voldemort himself would probably have a hard time besting me at this point. I'm the best Bloody duelist in Europe!"

"Leave me be, I know it was dumb, and I didn't get anywhere with it anyways." Then I mumble under my breath, "Draco fucking Malfoy. Oooh! Little ole me could never get his wand!"

The air chills between us as Draco grabs my book out of my hand.

"Hey!" I cry, trying to catch it in mid-air.

"Cut the shit, Hermione!" His tone is dangerous. "Do you think this is a game?" He bends to make me look at him, but I refuse, crossing my arms and legs to ward off his vitriol. "Did I not tell you this was going to happen when you asked me to do this in the first place?" He chucks my book onto the coffee table. "You're too hot-headed!"

"I couldn't just sit by and listen to it anymore." I narrow my eyes at him. "I'm not like you! I'm not immune to revolting cruelty like that!"

As soon as the words are out of my mouth I realize I went too far. Draco's body tenses and he turns to ice.

"You know more than anyone the toll my responsibilities take on me."

My anger vanishes as I drop my eyes and pick at my nails. "You're right. I do, I'm sorry." I let out a deep sigh. "It's just so awful. I have to sit there and play my silent part as those poor women weep next to me."

My tender-heartedness doesn't phase Draco. He flat-out refused to entertain the idea of this dangerous ruse at first. After he secured the portkey, I came up with the idea; it took me months of campaigning to get him to agree. He worried that the subterfuge would put me at risk, and tonight, I basically proved him right. He has been just as committed to saving as many witches as we possibly can, but only ever with the understanding that I would stay still and silent during these little get-togethers. So far, we've had Nott and Zabini over every month after they purchase new witches. They are sick, predictable dogs who can't go a week without having a poor woman to abuse, so there is always a steady supply of victims to help.

Still pissed, Draco orders, "This underground plot of yours is over if you ever pull anything like that again."

"Okay, fine!" I argue, waving him off. "Just get back down there and put an end to it."

I pick my book back up and attempt to forget the evening while Draco is out finishing up the remainder of the work.

He runs his tongue under his teeth and shifts his jaw, still fuming. However, then he turns and heads for the door.

"Set them up in that nicer apartment!" I call out as he walks away. This month, the women looked extra haunted. I want him to drop them off somewhere safe and comfortable so that they can begin to heal.

Draco doesn't respond; instead, he growls deep in his chest and keeps moving.

I shake out my wrist in anger, trying to dissipate Draco's dark and foreboding brand on my skin. Convincing him actually to brand me once he agreed to this plan took another two weeks of arguing.

Then, just as he is about to grab the doorknob, I add, "Can I at least be the one to Oblivate the sick Bastards this time?"

"No!" He turns around and points a finger at me, pissed. "And, you better look just like that when I come back!"

I push out my chest, cross my arms and legs and shoot him a cocky smirk. I know he is having difficulty staying mad at me in my current state of dress.

Then he heads into the hallway, shaking his head and saying under his breath, "Fucking hot as hell, but out of your damn mind."

March 2003

Oh shit.

I stare at my hands, trying to stop my mind from racing.

I'm spiraling, thinking about the ongoing war and Draco's awful and dangerous double life. I drop to the ground and hug my knees to my chest as tears fall down my cheeks.

I can't believe how woefully in denial I've been all these years. For five years now, I've gone about my life passionately loving my husband and ignoring the fact that horrific stuff is happening outside our Manor walls.

My skin is itchy, and I'm having a hard time getting a full breath.

I can't believe we thought we were immune to reality. We lived life like naive youth, ignoring looming responsibilities. We ate together, read, played music, tended our garden, brewed potions together, and fucked. Gods, did we fuck!

I hang my head and smash my fists into the carpet.

We played house, happily in love and at incredible risk. And now —

Draco's footsteps thump in my ears as he approaches. My stomach clenches, and I start to cry.

The light from the hallway causes me to squint as he enters the room and demands, "Hermione, what's going on?"

Chapter 38: Conversations & Revelations

Chapter Summary

"We are the reckless, we are the wild youth
Chasing visions of our futures
One day, we'll reveal the truth
That one will die before he gets there"
-Youth, Daughter

Chapter Notes

Happy Reading! This is the last chapter for this week. Enjoy!

May 2005

One more thing.

I pull the invisibility cloak out of my satchel and place it on the desk next to the Resurrection Stone, my copy of our wedding photo, and a phial of Mandrake Restorative Draught that I pilfered from our laboratory.

There.

Draco didn't return last night, so when I woke up this morning, I decided I needed to take matters into my own hands. Apparently, his time is very limited these days — even more so than in 1998, which I find confounding. Regardless, it seems as though if I want to move the needle on the reason why I agreed to come back to 2005, then I need to take the lead.

When he gets back, I'm going to make him talk. I'm writhing with the need to formulate a plan and finally end Voldemort's reign. There is so much that Draco and I have to unpack, but none of that will be possible if he keeps racing off to handle some evil task. Killing Voldemort needs to be priority number one.

I place a hand on my waist and pop my hip in thought. The collected items make me wonder how long I'll have to wait to implement them. The cloak shimmers, and the rock causes me to get lost in thoughts of Remus, Order Headquarters, and how far I've come since then. I pick up our wedding photo and stare at it for the thousandth time.

Gods, we were so happy that day.

Sighing, I brighten my eyes into a hopeful smile. I hear the front door open in the atrium, and my heart skips a beat.

He's home!

I hurry to the entry hall to meet Draco and shut his office door behind me on the way out. His back is to me as he removes his robe. The sight of him stops me in my tracks.

He looks...disheveled?

He's wearing jeans and a T-shirt—something I never saw him wear in any time period. His hair is flatter and in front of his eyes. His basic appearance is one of exhaustion.

"Great, you're back," I say, bouncing on my heels. "Come on we need to get going." Then I walk back into his office.

"What?" Draco looks surprised to see me, but he follows me nonetheless.

I step into his study and then rest my back against his desk, blocking everything from his view. Draco gives me a suspicious side-eye while standing taller.

"What is this about?" he asks. "Why are we in my office. I was hoping you'd still be asleep."

"Yeah, well, the early bird catches the worm."

As I step aside, Draco mumbles, "I was hoping to catch something myself." But as soon as he sees what I've gathered, he stops joking.

"Hermione, *what the fuck!*"

He slashes his wand through the air, vanishing the objects I set out for display. "Are you trying to get us killed?"

I curl into myself, taken aback by his response, and then clear my throat. "No, I just wanted to pull everything together so we could start mapping out a strategy." I scratch the back of my neck. "You know," I say under my breath, trying to join in the teasing. "—design some theoretical experiments and plot out various competing hypotheses," I repeat his words from our time at the vacation house. Still, the effect falls flat when I get lost thinking about what happened after that conversation.

Draco drops his forehead to his hand and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Death Eaters or Voldemort himself could stop by at any time and you thought you would lay out a display of the most dangerous items in all of Europe?"

When you put it like that, maybe this wasn't the best idea.

I feel deflated momentarily, realizing my mistake, but then snap back, "Well, you didn't mention that I should be on my guard for such visitors!" I cross my arms and then realize something. "And apparently we're allowed to use his name again?"

Waving his hand to dismiss my comment, Draco says, "He ended the taboo after winning the war." He flops down into one of the armchairs in front of his desk, asking, "Can this wait? I'm exhausted."

"Right, you seem to be very busy these days," I quip through tight lips. "And no. Where did you vanish those items to?"

"Somewhere safe." Draco rubs his forehead, moaning, "If I'm caught with just that contraband potion I'll be murdered, let alone the Hallows. Bloody-hell."

I think back to the potion, wondering what made it so dangerous. "Contraband?" However, as soon as the question is out of my mouth, I put the pieces together.

Draco lifts his eyes and gives me a *caught-on-did-ya?* look before he explains, "Voldemort destroyed all the remaining Restorative Draught and torched every Mandrake within 1000 miles after the Final Battle. It took me years to collect all the ingredients needed to brew that elixir."

I walk to Draco's desk chair, lost in thought, and sit. It makes sense. Voldemort wouldn't have wanted anyone to be able to revive the Order members.

Playing with the rivets of the leather armrest, I brace myself before asking, "How many members are still petrified?"

"All of them." Draco shifts in his seat to get more comfortable, then adds, "When you planted that idea in Voldemort's head it really took root. He salivated over the thought of torturing everyone."

"That's horrible," I whisper, thinking about how they're all alive but frozen, locked in their bodies.

"I did what I could."

I sit forward, watching Draco heave a deep sigh. "What do you mean?" I ask as my fingers halt on the armrest.

Draco leans back against the chair and slumps down. His knees are wide, and he has spread out his arms on the armrests. He looks like whatever he spent the night doing wiped him out as he leans his head back to the ceiling, closing his eyes. "He ordered me to petrify them, so I did, but I plied them all with Draught of Living Death first. I think they're still knocked out." Opening his eyes, he stares off into nothingness, then pauses for a long stretch. "Or at least I hope so."

I'm lost for words.

That's an incredible relief. Not only may I not have sentenced good people to years of torture, but Draco made that risky decision on his own.

I consider him while listening to the elves scurrying around doing their morning routines.

First, Draco tells me he trafficked witches out of Europe, and then this? I'm touched. I always saw Draco's goodness in the past, but he was so focused on protecting his family and me that he never had the opportunity to care much about anyone else. It seems that he's become somewhat of a rebel in my absence.

He did petrify them all on Voldemort's behalf, but ...baby steps!

I stare at him for another minute, trying to figure out who he really is now. He's Voldemort's assassin, yet he's also the Orders' kindest foe?

As I silently observe him, Draco yawns despite our conversation.

He's apparently been out, hitting up the bars with Muggles or at some sort of late-night football game because he looks like a hungover sports bro!

I give him a curious side-eye, asking, "Okay, but what's the plan? How are we going to end him?"

Draco brushes his hair out of his face and sits up. He immediately switches back into his authoritative default persona.

"*We* aren't going to end him," he orders, making sure he captures my gaze. "You've done everything I needed you to do. You brought back all the Hallows, and now your part is over."

"Great!" I spit, crossing my arms tighter and narrowing my eyes at him. "Then where's the time turner? I'm going back to my husband."

He can be so ridiculous at times. I'm more than capable of helping out. I've handled a lot already. Plus, why the hell am I here if all he needed were those objects!?

Draco leans forward, placing his elbows on his knees. "I'm your husband, witch."

His arrogance does something to my insides. My stomach flip flops, and I start to feel warm. What's wrong with me!?

"And I told you, I destroyed the turners the moment you got back."

He's getting irritable and I want to keep this conversation moving, so I sigh and shake my head to clear the air of our frustration.

"Fine, then what's *your* plan?"

Draco pushes up from his chair and stalks around the desk, then pulls me to my feet. My heart beats faster as he inches his hand over the hollow of my neck and into my hair. "You brought me the cloak, the ring, and the wand."

His touch makes my insides stir to life. Gods, I want him to kiss me. He's too skilled at muddling my mind with arousal. It's unnerving.

Wait, what? The wand?

I pull back, staring at him in confusion.

But Draco continues with a dangerous tone. "I'm going to pay him a visit, slaughter his fucking snake, and Avada his evil ass."

I'm still in such a state of shock that I miss the moment when Draco reaches behind me and pulls my wand from my back pocket.

Smirking at me, he shoves it into the waistband of his jeans behind his back and heads for the door.

"Draco! What the heck! Give me my wand back." I chase after him, yelling. "What are you talking about?"

I expect him to head upstairs to bed since he was out all night, but he walks to the kitchen instead. He doesn't answer me but pushes open the swinging door, and then a relieved smile crosses his features. "I love Mille," he says, grabbing the plate of buttered toast, poached eggs, and bacon she left out for him. Draco cancels the Stasis and picks up a strip of bacon, taking a bite.

"A funny thing happened," he says with a mouth full of food.

Glaring at him, I cross my arms. Who is this man? Since when does he talk with food in his mouth?

"When I gave you this," he adds, pulling my wand from behind his shirt and dropping it on the counter next to him. I want to grab it back, but he rests his hand on it, letting me know I won't have a chance of taking it from him. "I couldn't purchase a new wand or steel one without someone noticing and asking too many questions. So, I gave you my wand and told people, that I lost it in a standoff with some Order members." He grabs another bite to eat, then continues. "After I got the shit hexed out of me for losing my wand, I was able to force Olivander to make me a new one and it didn't seem suspicious."

"Okay —" I hedge, still not understanding how this all connects, but feeling bad he had to go through all that to give me back my access to magic. He never told me any of that at the time.

Draco brushes off his hands and picks up a piece of toast, enjoying another bite. Then he takes a sip from the glass of juice Millie also left out.

"Long story short, it turns out my wand *was* the Elder wand."

Shocked, I walk to the counter and grab a piece of toast for myself. "What?" I ask, fascinated by this odd turn of events. This is great! If Draco is correct, then we have all the Hallows! I munch on the buttery treat, leaning in and waiting to hear the rest.

"Snape and I put it together after the final battle. Essentially, it became mine when I disarmed Dumbledore." He takes the last bite of toast out of my hand and pops it in his mouth, winking at me. "We were encouraged by the discovery until I remembered I gave it to you! — which meant it was potentially lost in time somewhere."

Now it's starting to make more sense why Draco demanded I return to 2005. He needed way more than just me.

"Severus Snape is an Order Member! I remember, Remus mentioned that."

Draco takes a few more bites, downs the glass of OJ, and then vanishes the plate. "Right, I saw that in the memories you left me." He heads for the door. "I was so lost and confused," he shoots an angry look over his shoulder at me. "—pissed!— after you left, that I confronted him about it and we've been working together ever since."

I run to get in front of him and then stop. Draco halts in response. "So that's it?" I ask.

"Yep."

It sounds oddly anti-climatic. Part of me was hoping for more of a scene. Voldemort has been such a cancer and so insidious that it seems like his end should be spectacular.

I scowl at Draco in skepticism.

"Honestly, Hermione, the Bastard has been wasting away into mania over the past several years. He's heinous and vicious, but I can take him now if he's mortal." He bends to place a quick kiss on my temple, then coos, "I'm looking forward to it."

I don't know how I feel about all that. Draco might be doing that thing he does when he undervalues his own health and well-being for the sake of others.

"Well, give me my wand back until you need it!" I grump instead of raising my concerns.

Draco grabs my hand and leads me up the stairs. "I have something better," he states with sinful appeal.

He walks me to our bedroom, and while I'm always happy to fall into bed, we need to talk first, and sex won't make me forget that he has my lifeline to magic.

However, he surprises me by passing our four poster and walking to his tall dresser in the closet. He pauses for a beat, savoring the moment. Then he opens the top drawer, and I pull in

a quick breath.

"My wand!" I cheer, fisting my old friend.

I stare at it, turning the wood over in my palm and realizing how much I missed it. Draco's wand worked fine in my grasp— probably because we share a core. But nothing compares to my wand. I clasp my hand around it and sense how it connects to my magic, humming to life. Then, I smile, waving it to produce a string of sparkling lights. It feels so good to be reunited.

Draco watches me with a strange look of intense sadness. It's the same look I used to see when I caught him missing me before. Although, now it's hard to piece together which me he's grieving. I never had this wand in 1998.

This is all so messed up.

I slow my movements and drop my voice. "Draco?" I ask, finally ready to hear the worst. "What happened between you and I after I left?"

Part of me doesn't want to know. I can't stomach hearing about how he abused me. The fact that I asked him to do that to me still hurts. It's a deep wound that will likely never heal.

He looks gutted as he pulls his shirt over his head and kicks out of his boots. Draco walks to our bed, tilting his head, beaconing me to follow.

I huff a sour, incredulous laugh. When did he become nocturnal?

Pulling back the covers, Draco gets in bed and drags me into his arms. He settles me on his chest and leans against the headboard, stroking my hair.

"It was awful at first."

My body stills, and I hold my breath, waiting for him to continue.

"I was so hurt and furious with you after you vanished. I felt numb to the world." Draco adjusts himself, trying to get comfortable as he walks me through that terrible night. "I looked down at my wand held loosely in my hand after wiping your younger self's mind, and felt sick. Then, I moved through the rest of the final battle like a inferius, unable to think straight."

My stomach clenches, and my shoulders tense, thinking about how devastated he must have been. I picture him going through the motions, deadened to everything around him.

"Two days later I woke from my stupor at the vacation house. I'd gone on a raging binger and tried to drink myself to death. The place was destroyed."

"Draco — I—" The words catch in my throat. He's a few sentences in, and I'm already overcome with guilt.

He holds me tighter and soothes me. "Shh, Hermione, just let me tell you."

When I nod, he wipes the tear from my eye with his thumb. I grab his hand and hold it tightly as he continues.

"However, then I heard that the younger-you was being interrogated and it snapped me out of it. I needed to help. I needed to do something. And all I could do was wait." I feel the shiver of despair in his core like it happened yesterday. His voice lowers to a growl, and he almost can't make it through his next statement. "He tortured you for a month before I was able to convince him to give you to me."

We sit in silence for a moment while he collects himself. I'm glad I don't have those memories. This is the first time I've thought that. I think back to the one time that I remember Voldemort slicing through my head and how much agony it caused. Then my insides turn to ice.

Draco clears his throat. "Once I got you home it wasn't any easier. I— "

Here we go. This has already been too hard. I'm not sure I can do this.

"When did you move out of the penthouse and into the Manor?" I interrupt to postpone the bad news just a little bit longer. Draco senses my discomfort through the bond. He rubs his thumb over my wrist in response. His touch always has a way of making things better, even in the gravest situations.

"Voldemort made me the head of the Malfoy family and insisted my parents sign over the deed to me. I never liked this place and surely didn't want it, but I didn't have a choice. My Father was livid over the demotion." Draco tenses and I feel a caustic spike of anger. "He attacked you soon after you got here."

My stomach drops.

"Attacked? What did he— ? Did he hurt— ?"

Draco kisses the top of my head. "Don't worry I stopped him." He kisses me again. "He didn't hurt you. He just scared you." I take a shuddering breath. "Low-life piece of shit," he grumbles. "I locked him up in Azkaban for it. He's been rotting away for years."

I attempt to sit up. I can't hear the rest of this. I don't know why I asked. I'm upset, and I knew this was going to happen. I knew I was sentencing myself to years of abuse and mistreatment. Draco holds me down, though. He doesn't let me run away like I always want to do.

Draco used to feel a sense of duty to his Father. He hated him, but he also hated himself for those disloyal thoughts. It seems that he no longer cares to guilt himself over his true feelings. I take a steadying breath and remind myself that I need to hear this to have the whole picture. It's horrid, but I need to know.

My voice shakes as I ask, "You actually got me to hate you then?"

Draco freezes. I struck a nerve, and now it's my turn to provide comfort. I push up and gaze at him, watching the tremors of a haunted past cross his features. I remember the day he sent me to 1997 and how he railed at me, *"You get to forget! You get to be the victim!! Did you ever think what this would be like for me, Hermione!?"* My heart aches for the two of us not for the first time. Time and fate have not been kind to our love.

I wait for him to answer me. I have to look him in the eyes when he does. It's important for both of us.

"No. I couldn't do that."

My brows furrow, and I watch as the heavy weight of responsibility presses on Draco's shoulders. I don't understand. I remember him abusing me. I remember how terrifying he was and how trapped I felt. His words don't make sense.

But then I think back to how happy I was before I found the note I left myself in *Hogwarts: a History*. Wasn't I convinced of our love before then? I suck in a tight breath, daring to hope for a happier story.

"So, what happened then?"

I watch all of the fine lines around Draco's eyes loosen. He suddenly looks ten years younger.

"We fell desperately in love."

Holding my breath for a moment, I let what he just said sink in. It doesn't seem possible! But then I breathe a sigh of relief. I sense his sincerity through the bond and don't think twice

about believing him. This is what I never dared to dream for. We had it? We had years together, loving one another. For a brief moment I feel lighter than air.

But then my shoulders tense, and my chest weighs down with jealousy.

I missed all that time.

I slump back to his chest, wiping away an angry tear and tracing my fingers along his torso. Draco catches my bitter grief and gets mad.

"Hermione, you bound me to you, made me love you, then left me." He lets that sink in for a moment. "My bonded partner was gone. It felt like a hole in my magical core." He stops my hand and tilts my head up by my chin. "It felt like you died."

Another tear falls down my cheek as I listen to him. I know what it was like. I was just as devastated after I recently came back to 2005, but my agony only lasted a little over a week.

"Then you were with me, but — not. I still loved you, but I had no idea how to relate to that version of you."

"But, it worked out eventually?" I ask, hoping to ease his irritation.

Draco's anger flares again as he recounts what happened. He's sharing more with me than I hoped, but there are still so many questions.

He snarls as if trying to confess to receive absolution. Or to punish me with the truth. I don't know. "Repairing and rebuilding our relationship took so much longer than falling in love with you the first time! We were making great strides, but things were still complicated and hard to navigate." He drops his fingers from my chin and brushes his hair back with wide, tortured eyes.

"Let me paint the picture for you," he says, tilting his head to catch my gaze. "When you finally gave yourself to me, you thought you were making love to your caring husband — something you had done many times before." He pauses, and the air sizzles with silent tension. It goes on for a long time. We hold each other as I wait for him to work up the courage to admit what I know he's holding onto.

"I took your virginity that night."

I see the toll that his duplicity played on him. Draco was always the one who wanted honesty in our relationship. Having to lie to me ate away at his soul.

"I had to vanish the goddamned evidence before you could see it."

My blood chills, hearing him describe what it was like for him. "Oh Draco, I'm—"

I feel how much that experience wrecked him. The bond conveys all the nuances of complex emotions— how aroused he was to be intimate with me again, how he desperately missed me at the same time, how he tried not to harm me, and how devastated he was when he still ended up needing to deceive me.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, tasting my salty tears. "I didn't want to leave you," I moan.

It takes several minutes for our fragile emotions to calm. We hold one another in restorative silence, and then Draco surprises me again.

"I know you didn't. Hermione, it's okay," he says, holding me tighter. "I understand now that it wasn't your fault."

Clearing his throat, he adds, "Plus, you and I built an indescribably beautiful life together. I couldn't do it. I couldn't make you hate me."

I understand why he didn't go through with it, and I can't really stay jealous. I left him, but I didn't want him to suffer for six years. The idea that we found our way to one another despite the circumstances causes me to ache with bittersweet appreciation. "Can you tell me about what it was like?" I choke out.

Draco shifts, lying down and facing me. He tucks me into his arms and stares into my eyes. "I'm going to give you every detail." He's adamant, and his fervor warms my heart. "I'm really good at telling you our story by now. You'll get to see it." He runs his thumb over my cheek, catching another tear. This time, I'm crying tears of gratitude. "You'll get to experience it." Then he kisses me, and it's so tender that I swear the earth's foundation shifts in response. "We'll do that together."

Draco kisses my wet lips again, and I'm overcome with deep, searing love for him. He tells me that we had it—the love story I always yearned for.

"I kept us safe," he says to soothe us both.

I shut my eyes and savor how good it feels to know he protected our love. However, while everything he is telling me sounds perfect, it still doesn't make sense. The dots don't connect.

"But then, when did you change? How did everything play out to bring us together in the first place and, why were you so mad at me when I first came back to 2005? You kept saying I left you, but you know I didn't have a choice."

Draco ghosts his hand over my stomach under my shirt. Then, he fists it in his grip, upset again.

"I'm not mad about when you left me at the final battle. I understand now." He kisses me again, but I taste his frustration.

"I'm mad about when you left me the second, *fucking*, time."

"What?" I sit up, shocked. "What are you talking about?"

However, Millie *Pops!* into the room at that moment.

What is it with her interrupting us all the time!?

Out of instinct, I grab onto him, clutching his arm.

"Master, you is needed —,"

But Draco and I both cut her off, speaking simultaneously.

"—again?" he growls.

"No!" I hiss.

Millie stills. Her little head bobs back and forth between the two of us.

"No!" I repeat, shooting up and glaring at him before I whip back around to her and point a finger in her direction, demanding, "No!" I turn back to Draco. "You're not leaving. You just got home. Damn it, Draco!"

He pushes back the covers and stands. "I'm sorry, love. I know this isn't ideal. But I have to go."

Hopping out of bed, I bark, "Millie, leave us!" then I grab his hand. "Draco," I beg.

He stands, frozen in indecision, warring with himself over something. I hold my breath, hoping I can convince him to stay. Things between us are too fragile and important right now. I need to hear more about what he just meant.

"Come on," he sighs in frustration, surprising me.

"What? Where?"

Draco looks as though he is making a critical decision. He's tense, but after a moment, he seems to settle into the idea.

He kisses my forehead and grabs my hand. "Come on," he says again, softer. "It's time."

Everything in me sparks to high alert. Draco thrust me into a year-long, earth-shattering discovery the last time he said those words. I pull back in apprehension, but he leads me forward.

He guides me to the fireplace and tosses in the Floo powder while I attempt to catalog his every move to prepare myself for what's to come. There's a swirl of green flames and a woosh of magic, and then I find myself standing on the fireplace hearth of our penthouse.

Confusion pours through me as a high-pitched wailing wrenches the air. I can't think straight. The noise causes my mind to freeze in shock.

Draco hurries forward to help, as Narcissa Malfoy rounds the corner into view carrying a baby girl.

All the air in the room and on all the floors below us stops moving. My heart jumps to my throat, and my legs weaken with shock and longing.

Ever the confident soldier, Draco scoops the crying bundle from his mother's arms, throws her onto his shoulder and nuzzles her cheeks. She squeals as he places his thumb in her mouth to let her chew on him.

Oh my god.

Oh my god

Oh my —

"Hermione," he says with the kindest, most careful voice as the baby lights up. "this is your daughter, Genesis."

Chapter 39: Her Room

Chapter Summary

"I guess all the mountains that I moved just weren't enough
And all those nights I walked you home
From crowded bars when you were drunk
Well they meant nothing 'cause you up and walked away
And I just wonder what it'd take to make you stay
'Cause when you said jump I said how high
But when I jumped you said goodbye
I would've walked through hell
To find another way
I would've laid me down
If I knew that you would stay
I would've crossed the stars
To keep you in my life
But now I'm falling hard
Without you here tonight
Without you here tonight"
-Walked Through Hell, Anson Seabra

Chapter Notes

Here it is folks...the chapter that broke my heart.

I love these two and ache for them. And, I am so honored that you love them too!

Your kind words mean so much to me. I cannot thank you enough for your support of this piece. I really enjoy reading that you've found some of the little nuggets I left throughout the story!! I wrote up a timeline yesterday of all the dates and moments and twists and turns and it felt like quite an accomplishment. LOL!

Trigger warning this chapter contains a brief talk of pregnancy options. Also, there is all the same toxic relationship traits.

Happy Reading!

April 2003

I'm numb to the world around me as the horrible MediWizard waves his wand a little too close for comfort while pushing on my stomach.

Picking at my nails, I realize they're getting a bit long, and I need to cut them. I rub my fingers together and shove them under my legs as I sit on the edge of our bed.

"As you thought, Sir. She is carrying your child."

The greasy old man whispers to Draco like I'm not even sitting here. He left me on the bed after his rude appraisal, and they're now standing to my back. Draco controls the very air in the room with his arms crossed, looking like stone.

I swipe a hand over my cheek to stop a tear from falling, then hang my head.

I hate this.

I can feel Draco's eyes on me as he asks, "Is she healthy?"

Draco sounds dangerously calm. His drive to protect me is through the roof. It claws at our bond.

"The baby girl is fine, Sir."

I place my hand on my stomach and feel Draco's spike of frustration and anger. I'm not showing yet. It's only been a few weeks. However, apparently, he can tell with the simple wave of his wand what this poppy seed-sized life will become. I let out a shuttered sigh. Wizarding Obstetrics is nothing like Muggle healthcare.

I'm carrying a girl?

I try that on, wondering if it makes me feel any different, but it doesn't. I'm destroyed with anguish, desperately wanting to live a normal, happy life where Draco and I could raise and love this child. But that isn't possible.

The MediWizard drops his voice. "Would you like me to take care of it?"

I whip around and stare, wide-eyed at Draco. Do I want that? It might be the answer to our problem. But then again, my heart aches at the thought. I lift my brows to my husband.

Draco's voice is ice. He inches his head toward the disgusting health professional and sneers in a terrifyingly quiet tone, "Get. Out." The man bows his head and hobbles to the door. I often forget how intimidating Draco is to anyone outside of this household.

"Hermione?" he asks as I turn back to the windows.

I don't respond. Instead, I lay on my side and curl into a ball on top of the covers.

"I'll be right back."

I hear Draco stomp across the room and know he's on his way to see the MediWizard out. I also know that the horrid little man is about to lose his recollection of this afternoon. There is no way my cautious partner is going to let him keep his memory of this visit.

I don't know how much time passes before Draco returns, but when he does, I haven't moved.

He rounds the bed and crouches to my eye level, brushing back my hair. His eyes hold an eternity's worth of sympathy for me.

"We're having a girl," he says, trying to cheer me up.

His poorly concealed joy is like a knife to my heart. How can he be so happy about this? Why doesn't he understand how terrible this situation is? And how the hell could we have gotten so careless!?

"I'm sorry we found out that way, but Hermione," he repeats, "...we're having a baby girl."

"No, Draco, we can't!" I bury my face into the pillow. "It's not safe." My voice cracks, "She won't be safe. I can't do this."

We've been having the same argument for the past 24 hours. As soon as I felt nauseous yesterday and realized I was late, horror crept over my skin. I crumpled, feeling anxious and knowing that we couldn't add a baby to the dangerous mix that is our lives.

I lift my head and stare at him, sniffing, "Maybe we should consider it."

"Stop," he whispers.

"No, really Draco, it's too hard. This is no life for a child. We can't do this. Maybe we should —"

Anger creeps up Draco's back, but he tries to tamp it down for my sake. Then, through tight lips, he says, "If circumstances were different, would you want to have my child?"

"More than anything!" I curl my arms tighter around my body. "But, circumstances aren't different and she won't be safe!" I wail the last few words, and they get caught in my throat.

Furious, Draco asks, "Have I kept you safe?" He's stone as he awaits my answer.

So much of Draco's life revolves around keeping me safe. He strictly controls who I interact with and where I spend my time. It might seem suffocating in other situations, but we live in a perilous post-war reality. I often take for granted how normal I can live because of his sacrifices. Other than being confined to the Manor, I live a cherished existence. But, with a child, things change. Any visitor would pose a threat. And being stuck in our home, no matter how big it is, isn't fair to a child.

"Yes, but it's not the same." I refuse to meet his gaze.

Draco threads his hands through my hair, forcing me to look at him. He stresses his question to emphasize his point.

"Have I kept you safe?"

"Yes."

Draco stands, then settles himself on the bed, pulling me into his arms and placing my head on his chest. "Love, this is your body. We can do whatever you choose. But, I have to be honest with you." He runs his hand over my curls, "The idea that my child is growing within you, is —" He pauses, holding me close and considering everything. Then he says with an ardent vulnerability. "—it's the best news I can imagine."

Sliding his hand beneath my shirt to splay his fingers over my stomach, he states, "I love you. And, I love our baby." Draco clears his throat, getting choked up. "We can do what you want, but don't you dare make the choice based on her safety."

I close my eyes and burrow into him, moaning, "Draco, you work for Voldemort. You're his second in command! We lead one of the most dangerous existences possible. I can reconcile that for myself. I'm willing to take the risk because I love you and I know you're doing what you can to stop his nightmare of a society. But, a *baby*?!"

Draco stills and then responds sounding frightening, "Hermione, because of my position, no one would dare touch my child."

He drops his voice and kisses the top of my head. When he speaks, it's as if he is talking to both of us.

"I'll protect her!"

Then he insists quieter, "I'll protect you both."

September 2003

"Close your eyes."

My smiling husband just walked through my office door. I do as he asks and hold out my hand. Draco weaves my arm through his, and then I feel a rush of magic.

He Apparated us?

With my eyes closed, I tilt my head to gather more information.

I don't think we left the Manor, but it's darker.

I hear a door open, and he pulls me forward into a warm room.

"Okay, open them."

Blinking a few times, I take in my surroundings. Then I suck in a tight breath.

"Draco!"

I turn slowly, cataloging all the changes. There's a crackling fire, but it blazes behind a safety ward. I pad towards it and hold my arm out. I feel the warmth but can't touch the flames.

The large bed is gone, replaced by a braided rug, a short walnut bookcase, a rocking chair, and a tall stuffed dragon. It's a Common Welsh. The green scales match the room, and her expression is funny because she looks so grumpy while sitting amongst the cheery decor. There are no more chairs under the window. Instead sits the most beautiful crib I've ever seen. It's antique wood, oval, and covered with a light shade. Hanging in mid-air over the bed is a mobile of stars, moons, and—

"Beakers?" I turn and smile at Draco.

He shrugs, grinning, "You can never start too early." Then he crosses the room and wraps his arms around me from behind. He stretches his large hand out over my growing belly and kisses my neck. "Especially, if our girl is going to be as smart as her mom."

He brought me to the room on the third floor. It's where I've spent the most amount of time other than in my study. I've always loved this room and felt even more connected to it after Draco admitted what happened here.

I turn around in his arms and feel our child pressed between us. Then I rest my forehead on his shoulder, reflecting on how good it feels to shield her with our bodies. Savoring the moment, I raise my eyes to his, glide my hands up his chest, and kiss him.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"It's the least I could do." He holds my waist and bends to kiss me again. The embrace heats as I drop from my tiptoes and bend backward to meet his intensity. Then he smiles into my lips, "You've certainly been doing more than your fair share of the work."

Draco carefully brought me out of my dark despair as he had done so many times before. When I first realized that I was pregnant, it sent me into a month's long tailspin of fatalistic thinking. I couldn't see how this would work, and it hurt. It hurt because I so desperately wanted our story to be one where finding out I was pregnant meant excitement and not fear. I wanted to have his baby, but I couldn't stand the idea of it being stuck in the middle of the dystopia we live in.

However, for Draco, our child was a second chance, an opportunity to nurture goodness in the world. More than that, she represents the ultimate connection between us. And, maybe—even though he would never say it — an anchor. Our baby was the reason for me to never leave him again. She would be his insurance for a love-filled future. He held me through my darkest days and slowly worked to help me accept that even though the world wasn't a perfect place to raise our child, we were perfect parents, perfect partners.

I look around the room that he created for our daughter and smile. I like the idea of my Death Eater husband coming home from work to spend time setting up this space. I imagine him fiddling with the placement of furniture and picking out the right stuffed creature.

I stick my head into the ensuite and find a toy Thunderbird sitting on the edge of the bath, a changing station, and several fluffy, mint-green towels. Seeing how cozy and secure this space is, I feel a release of tension. Turning back to the main room, I even catch a small, solar-powered light sitting on the windowsill. It's the kind that projects tiny stars on the ceiling at night.

When Draco catches my look of awe, he shrugs, "She needs to have some kind of Muggle artifact. It's part of her lineage."

I scan the room again, and Draco meets me and then guides me to look out the window.

"What is that?" I ask, leaning toward the glass.

"It's a swing. I thought it would be nice if she could see it out of her window."

It's more than a simple swing set. Stationed next to the front gate, there stands a new enchanting playground. A rose-covered trellis marks the entrance, and there are topiaries shaped like animals. There are wooden climbing structures, and attached to a large tree, there is a baby swing. The park stands out against the cold ground. It's blooming and shimmering in the sunlight, obviously newly built.

His care moves me. He thought of everything. "It's just right," I hum.

Draco wraps his arms around me again and says, "Good, because there's only three months to go."

October 2003

"That's my girl," Draco purrs in my ear. He's pressed up against my back in the shower with his cock in my core, a sinful finger on my clit, and my aching nipple pinched between his thumb and middle finger. As he gently rolls his digits over my stiff peak, I pant.

"Fuck, I love how sensitive your tits are these days."

I'm climbing higher as the warm water glides down my back, and my front is pushed up against the cool tile.

"Stop gloating," I smile as my breath hitches. I'm finding it harder and harder to talk. Gods, this man is all I need. The world can fall away as long as I have this. This stretch of my sex around his thick shaft, this thrust into the wall and back as Draco chases his release, this bliss.

His arrogant laugh only amps up my fever. He's so cocky, and I'm here for it. "Oh, I'm gloating, all right." He pushes in and out and glides his strong fingers over my silky wet folds. Then he captures my earlobe in his mouth and I see stars. I'm reduced to nerve endings and desire as he tugs at my nipple and palms my heavy breasts, rolling his finger over my tingling clit while thumping against my cervix. Thrusting in and out, he groans, "I thought

my wife was a minx before. I had no idea how sex-crazed she'd become when she was round with my child."

His words have blurred into nothingness. All I feel is my stuttered breathing, my rising need, and his delicious, skilled touch. It's everywhere.

"I should've knocked you up sooner," he says into my neck.

I scrunch my eyes and try to hold back the torrent of arousal for just a second longer. The anticipation swims around in my head, making me drunk with lust. I could cum from just his friction on my nipple. He's right, I'm so sensitive. Oh fuck, he feels so good.

Draco presses once more into my drenched channel, and I start to moan. It's a shameless sound. I'm mewling like an animal in heat with my cheek pressed to the wall. He flattens his hand and presses all four fingers together, kneading them back and forth over my sex. And I lose it. I roll my hips to capture each ounce of pleasure and press back against his advance, causing him to groan. He leaves his hand on my clit but throws his other hand flat against the wall, smashing my tits to the cold tile and slapping into me. I crash on the waves of release as he roars out his completion.

When we finally come down, I'm heaving deep breaths against the tile, and Draco is resting his weight on his hand against the wall. He kisses the top of my head as my breathing slows.

"Bloody, hell, witch," he praises.

I adjust myself as he slides out of me and then turn to face him. Kissing him, I ask, "One more time?"

November 2003

The garden looks frosty as the earth prepares for winter. There's no snow, but the dormant plants are fast asleep. I consider the lush garden's peaceful slumber amid the frosty ground while holding my stomach. It's now large with our growing daughter. She's almost here. I wince as she kicks and pushes on my ribs, trying to break forth into the world.

"Not yet, Gen," I whisper.

With each new day, I begin to feel more and more certain that I have to say something. I take a deep breath and head out of my study in search of Draco.

When I find him, he's brewing in the Potion's lab.

"Draco?" I say, pushing open the door.

He looks up from the cauldron and shoots me a frustrated glare.

"Hermione, what are you doing? You know you shouldn't be down here with all these fumes."

He hastens to place a Stasis on the Potion, vanishes the smoke, and meets me at the door. Then he walks me out and pulls the wood shut.

"What are you brewing?" I ask before I force him to have a conversation that he's going to hate.

Staring down at me and scowling, he replies, "Murtlap Essence, Calming Draught, Sleeping Potion, and Healing Potion."

I raise my eyebrows into my hairline, "That's it?" I tease. "What? Are you preparing for something?"

"Hmm, maybe," he answers. "Now get back upstairs."

I finger the button on his cuffs with my eyes on our shoes and then gather my courage.

"We need to talk."

Our bond is so useful at times. It meant that Draco could swoop in and save me on several occasions or comfort me when I've been at a loss for words. But sometimes, it makes communication more complicated, like now. There's no subtlety to my statement. Draco knows.

His eyes darken as he senses that this will be no normal talk. It won't even be an out-of-the-ordinary talk. He knows I'm about to bring up the topic he has almost strictly forbidden.

I close my eyes as his anger presses on my chest.

Draco places a finger under my chin and lifts my eyes to his. Then he raises one arrogant, intimidating brow, demanding, "Think twice, wife."

Staring at him, I do think twice. Stress isn't good for the baby, and things have been going so well for Draco and me. With his help, we fell in love with the idea of becoming parents; we've been spending time in the nursery together, imagining what she will be like, and we've even been able to continue saving witches while we prepare for Gen's arrival. However, Draco insists on transfiguring me when Nott and Zabini visit. He doesn't want anyone to know that we're expecting.

All of that has been great, not to mention my raging hormones causing us to spend very little time outside of our bed. But that happiness is about to come to an end if I bring this up.

"The stakes are higher now," I reason, dropping my gaze again. "We have to think through what will happen if you don't send me back to 1997. Our time is running out."

Draco's shoulders tense, and his eyes turn to ice. He offers a pointed glare to my pregnant belly, raising his condescending, angry eyebrows. "You think there's a chance I'm going to send you back in time now?" It's a trap. He's furious and laying down the gauntlet. "You must, if you're willing to provoke me."

The ancient stone walls that surround us feel like they're closing in. Draco wrestled with how to approach our time-travel woes. Though it's obvious he fell hard for the future me, he insists we're the same witch, and he refuses to participate in creating the world we saw in her memories. He's satisfied with our life together and doesn't want to risk anything upsetting the balance we've created.

"No, but we need to have all the details!" I plead, raising my hand to cup his jaw. "We need to do as much research as possible so that we can make an, informed decision."

Slapping my hand away, he narrows his eyes at me. "Are you *trying* to recreate my most painful memories?"

"No, of course not!"

Standing to his full height again, he accuses me. "You sound just like her."

My face grows warm as I start to fume. I lose track of my desire to entice Draco into helping me and instead snap back, "You mean that I sound just like myself?" I need to get him to see reason. This isn't just about us any longer. "Well then, you should listen to me!" I cross my arms over my swollen breasts, scowling. "I'm really smart. Or so you keep telling me."

"We're done with this," Draco demands, placing a hand on my lower back and gesturing for me to head back upstairs.

Pushing against his hand as he tries to usher me away, I cry, "Draco! I want you to get me those books! I can't sleep because I'm so worried about potentially misunderstanding time," I plant my feet, reasoning, "And, it's not good for me to lose sleep right now. —or be this stressed." I'm trying to appeal to his desire to keep me and Gen healthy.

I haven't pushed him on this topic in a very long time. It was too easy to accept that Draco loved me for who I was and that he didn't need to chase any other version of me.

Instead, we burrowed into a life where if Draco comes home to find me staring out of the Manor gates, longing to be free to roam, then he takes my hand and guides me inside to show me more of the outside world through his memories of traveling.

We've cultivated a love where we play music together to soothe our souls, and then we hunker down in his office, pouring over ways to save more Muggle-born witches and wizards from this unjust world.

We've harnessed care for one another where I buffet him from his corrosive self-hate, kneading the knots of trauma out of his wide shoulders after bad nights. And, in return, he shields me from my depression. He holds me and grounds me back in the moment by offering words of understanding and reassurance.

In fact, the only one of his inner demons I haven't been able to chip away at has been Draco's fear of losing me again.

I knew he'd be mad, but Draco's fury surprises me as he grasps my upper arm and drags me out of the basement.

"What are you—!?"

He stomps up the winding stone steps and kicks open the door to the main floor, depositing me in the hall. As soon as he lets go, I spin around and shoot daggers at him. Draco is unphased.

Pointing a finger in my face, he snarls, "Love, you're about to be the mother of our child. I've put up with your distress about time too much in my life." He slams the basement door and stands to his full height. "You will not bring this up with me again."

His vitriol takes me aback, but if I'm honest, I knew he'd be threatened by my demands that we need to investigate time travel. It didn't go well last time, either. And now, because of Gen, he probably thought he was safe from this particular form of torture.

Draco continues, "Before, I gave you the impression that I'd tolerate this discussion. But, let me be clear. I won't." He waves his wand, summoning a phial out of thin air, then tosses it at me, dismissively. "Here's a Sleeping potion if you're having such a hard time. Now, I'm going back downstairs to forget you were foolish enough to approach me about this again."

It's like I pressed Draco's be-domineering-and-unreasonable button. He went from sweet and kind to Voldemort's Head of Magical Law Enforcement in the blink of an eye. Getting pregnant with Genesis changed things for him. Where he was always protective and stern, now he is completely disobliging.

He has always protected me with a possessive intensity as if I'm the only thing he cares about in the world. But I'm a grown witch, someone who is very capable of defending herself when push comes to shove. Our baby will be helpless. She not only wrapped her unborn tiny fists around his heart, but she also needs his safeguarding more than ever. He's afraid that learning more about time travel will cause me to develop crazed ideas and leave him again or do something dangerous.

I'm afraid that if we don't learn more, we may accidentally cause Gen to never be born.

"Fine, if you're going to be an arse I'm just going to say it."

My comment stops Draco in his tracks; his hand is on the door handle to the basement, and he doesn't turn around. I can feel the heat of unchecked anger pouring off of him as his chest rises and falls.

"You have to do what the future-me said before I left you at the final battle. You need to make me fear you or we're going to risk never meeting. We're going to risk losing Gen!"

"You're out of your *goddamned* mind!" he demands.

Draco whips around to face me, more pissed than ever. "And, unfortunately for you, I'm not seeking input on this!" He heaves a deep breath and dictates the attention of even the cold tile beneath our feet. "I changed the course of history when I refused to abuse you years ago!" The tension between us spikes and pulls as he asks, "Can you even conceive how hard it was to give up on the idea of ever seeing that version of you again!?"

We hear an elf bustling through the atrium and Draco turns to the hall. He offers the little creature a blistering stare causing them to scurry out of sight.

"I am not going to force you to think of me as a monster. This conversation is over. Do you understand me?"

Two can play this game. We can both be pissy. I cross my arms and stand my ground.

"Oh, you're against acting like a controlling asshole, huh?" I plant my feet and snap at him, "You seem to be doing a pretty good job already! Don't forget, you're supposed to wipe my memories first."

Narrowing his eyes, Draco lowers his voice and spits, "For being such a smart witch, you don't seem to know when to stop."

I can't believe him. It's like he is woefully in denial and there is no arguing that is going to change that. How can he leave so much to chance? He knows better than anyone the dangers of playing with time. How can he simply refuse to do any research and just move through life thinking if he demands it hard enough that fate will fall in line with his plans? He never learned. He keeps trying to control time rather than being dictated by it.

Well, that isn't how I operate. I need to verify the facts, research our options, and consider all the possibilities.

"Draco, I'm tired of this," I sigh. "I want those books. You're going to get them for me, or I'm making a trip to Diagon Alley myself."

Matching my simple disaffected pronouncement, Draco orders, "Hermione, I'm tired of this too." He places his hands in his pockets, shifts his jaw, and runs his tongue under his teeth.

"And, you forget who I am. Step one foot outside these walls and I'll show you."

One week later, I'm snarling mad as I watch him slam the door on his way out of our bedroom. Bits of mortar fall to the ground in response to how hard he crashed the door shut. My heart is beating a million miles a minute.

I called his bluff and visited Florish and Blotts.

Draco sensed my shift in location and came to get me the second I stepped foot inside the store. Our magical core popped with a hostile torment as he fisted me by the back of my neck, dragged me out of the shop, and Apparated me back home.

His expression was terrifying as he said in a bone-chilling, calm tone after marching me upstairs, "You just put my child at risk."

His words sliced through the air between us. It felt like he slapped me. Draco knew that I didn't give two shits about my own safety and that I only attempted the trip because of my concern for our baby. He chose his words carefully in order to hurt. But, also, he was warning me not to put his family in danger. He was exceptionally skilled at decimating those who tried.

Menacing and foreboding, he spat, "Attempt something like that again and I *will* be the monster you're so desperate to elicit."

As I watch him go, I feel the dark hands of fate settling into place.

February 29, 2004

"Shh, Gen, shh! You're okay," I coo as I rock my daughter in my arms. I just finished feeding her, and she's struggling to fall asleep. I lightly touch her nose, then run my fingers over the birthmark on her neck—familiar moves that bring us both comfort. I hold her tiny head in my right hand and her body with my left, gently swaying her in order to soothe away her tears. It takes another few seconds, but then I watch her little blue eyes blink, and she nods off.

Thank the gods.

Kissing her little cheek, I linger for a moment to smell her sweet, fresh scent. Then I brush away a tear from my eye and secure her onto my chest with a long swath of fabric.

I wrap the cloth tightly around us and tie a knot under her little bum, making sure to tuck her head to my chest and secure the fabric to support her head.

Then I savor the way she melts into me... before shooting into action.

I fist a couple of bottles of Calming Draught and down them so that Draco won't catch on. Luckily, he made so much. He's away at work, so this is my chance.

Draco and I recovered after the massive row that lasted over two weeks. Spending sixteen *Bloody* days stewing in my office helped me to make a cosmic decision. He may have never backed down. So, I eventually crawled into his lap and begged for forgiveness, promising to drop all talk of time travel.

That night, he took me hard. Draco affixed my hands to the headboard with a spell and insisted, "You're mine, and you're not leaving me again," before he buried his face in my cunt and then drilled into me with a punishing intensity.

The next day, Genesis Lyra Malfoy was born.

I went into labor early in the morning, buckling over in pain and crying out for Draco to listen.

"I don't want that foul old Gargoyle!" I said, grabbing onto his forearm as he headed for the door to fetch the Mediwizard. "Please, Draco! Just stay. Ouch!" I stumbled as another contraction tore through me. "You, me, and Millie. That's it!"

He nodded and then complied with my request. "Okay, love," he said, kissing my forehead.

In the end, he held me all day as I labored. Draco sat behind me and wrapped me in his embrace. He held my stomach and encouraged me. "Push, baby, you're doing great. You're so strong. You've got this."

"No," I mewled at one point when I was exhausted. "No more." I rolled my head back and forth on his chest.

"Shh, love, close your eyes. I'm here with you."

He didn't let Millie in until the end but instead reached around me from behind and gently coaxed our baby girl from between my legs. After she arrived, we panted together, holding her to my chest. Then Draco finally summoned Millie to help us.

Over the past eleven weeks, he's been nothing short of perfect.

Draco cradles our tiny child, singing sweet songs and luring her to sleep. He has this way of draping her over his arm and holding her one-handed while patting her back, that makes her putty in his hands. Or, he fetches her in the middle of the night when I'm exhausted, and she's hungry. He pulls her from the crib in her room and brings her to my breast, waiting to make sure she latches.

Everything has been perfect except my gut-wrenching fear, which grows daily. When everything was theoretical, I could try to be in denial like Draco, but as soon as she was born, the need to set things right began to burn inside me.

I stare down at her slumbering head and gasp. Even with my heart swimming with the potion-induced peace, losing her steals my breath from my lungs.

That's why, when I've downed the potions I set to work.

Draco won't let me investigate time, but that's not necessary to set in motion critical historical milestones.

I walk through the fire in our bedroom and step directly into Gen's nursery. Draco connected our rooms after she was born to ensure we could get to her quickly when she needed something at night.

When I enter her room, I look around in sadness. I close my eyes and take a steady breath. Then I bend to pick up the silver rattle at my feet that we abandoned earlier.

This will only be a few months. I'll be back after Draco finds me at Order Headquarters.

"You'll have Daddy," I whisper while kissing her sleeping head. "He'll be here for you. He'll keep you safe."

I shake the thought process out of my head. I don't want to think about that right now.

I'll be back before she knows I'm gone. Plus, she's too young to remember my absence anyway.

I try to reason away my actions but have difficulty stomaching the truth.

The truth...

I'm about to leave her behind.

I'm suddenly wrecked. I collapse into the nearby rocking chair and cradle my daughter's body while rocking back and forth and trying to collect myself. The serenity from the Potion struggles to keep up with my anguish. I'm leaving her.

I'm leaving.

The crippling shame slams at my wall of serenity, turning my mouth sour. I hate that I am about to abandon my child and break my husband's heart— again! But, I was never able to get him to see reason.

And I can't risk her life.

I need to keep moving forward.

Determined, I stand and set to work, vanishing her crib, rug, mobile, dragon, and more. I send them to our penthouse, even though Draco has never brought me there. It's the only place I can think of to take her where she will be hidden and safe while time plays out.

Once the room is wiped clean, I summon back the furniture from before, watching as the bed and chairs reappear.

I need to erase her from this house. Over the next four months, this will no longer be our home. Instead, it will be a jail cell. If I've situated my jumbled memories correctly, then this place will soon be the setting of nightmares.

I move quickly, holding her head as I race around the house, checking for loose wooden rings—the kind she just learned to fist— or pacifiers or blankets.

"I'm just going to be gone for a few months," I whisper while tucking a picture of her, Draco, and me into her blanket. My words catch in my throat, but I know that the benefits will outweigh the time lost.

I try my best to ward off memories of pressing on her little feet to make her smile or laying on our stomachs together while she learns to hold up her own head. She has this sweet way of swaying back and forth that warms my heart.

When everything is set, I summon Millie. I'm standing in the dark room that was her nursery just five minutes ago. It looks cold and uninviting now.

"Mrs?" She asks when she arrives in front of me.

Swiping the tears from my eyes with my forearm, I press on. "Millie, there's breast milk under Statius that I sent to the penthouse. I left what I could."

I'm bent over, rushing to give her directions. I didn't even give her time to ease into this new threat.

"What!?" Her ears flop back, and she cringes, already fearing where this is going. "I'll summon Master—,"

"No!" I snap, grabbing her frail wrist.

Tension pools between us. We stare at one another for a minute as Gen hums and coos in her sleep. In the shadows of the room, I'm sure I looked crazed.

That doesn't matter, though. "You know he's wrong," I insist, cradling the back of Gen's head to my chest and bouncing her gently. My treasured elf friend confirms my suspicions by wringing her hands in her smock.

"But, Mrs.?" She whines. She is darting her eyes from me to the window, the fireplace, and the door, looking for any source of help.

"I'll be back in a few months," I reason to make us both feel better. I'm trusting a lot to her, but Millie has already proven her ability to tend to Gen. They took to one another immediately.

"Mills, she is your only priority now. Do you understand me?" I give her a look only a desperate mother can produce, and Millie cowers in response. "You know she only sleeps if you rock her. She needs to be bounced after eating, too, and she shouldn't nap too long in the afternoon.

I'm being ridiculous, rattling off all the various details that I have learned about my child.

"Take her to the penthouse," I continue my instructions.

"No Mrs." She cries. "She needs yous. *He* needs yous."

"No one will need me if I don't do this. I have to! Or we'll never get together." I get choked up as I add, "She'll never exist."

Taking care not to wake her, I slowly unwrap my daughter, then hold her out for Millie to take. Tears streak down my unnaturally calm face due to the Potion. I'm moving on autopilot,

wishing my daughter goodbye for now.

Millie shakes her head. Her ears flap, and she looks scared. But I don't back down. "Go!" I demand, causing Millie to jump and bundle her into her tiny arms. Gen looks ginormous compared to the small elf, but I know Millie's little arms can carry the load just as well as her shoulders will endure this responsibility.

I'm making the right decision.

I'm making the right decision! I tell myself as I watch Millie prepare to head to the penthouse.

Then, just before she leaves, I call out. "Wait!" She stops, and I run to her, scooping up my baby and nuzzling her sleeping form. "Mama loves you. I'll be back. I promise!"

I hold her for a few more seconds as time stands still. Magic swirls around us as I attempt to bind my child together with my love. I envision thin cords of protection knitting themselves around her newborn form. Then, destroyed, I hand her back and repeat my demand. "Go!"

The war between calm and devastation is making me sick. As they leave, I distract my aching heart by moving forward. I head to the library and almost make it before I remember.

The playground!

It will look suspicious to have that in our garden. I need to remove it. Racing outside, I start casting the spells to cloak the sweet gift from her father. I don't want to destroy this. I'll just preserve it for later.

There is a thunderstorm rolling in that matches my dour situation. Dark clouds are creeping toward me.

The sight of the swing rocking in the evening wind causes me to lose it. It's the final straw, and the calming potions are no match for my grief. I clutch my throat, stare up at the sky to stem the flow of my anguished tears, and begin to wail.

"Hermione—?"

Draco's dark voice is cautious. I didn't hear him Apparate home, but I know he's here because of my distress.

At first, I have a hard time seeing him through the haze of my watery eyes. I blink several times and rub under my lids to clear my vision. When I do, I take in his tortured form. I'm not sure that he's put it together yet, but it's clear that he knows something is very wrong.

"Where's Genesis?"

Draco's question hurts—physically. I hunch my shoulders and avoid making eye contact with him because I feel his scorching anger in my bones.

Hyperventilating, I cry, "I have to!"

His plan backfired. Draco refused to let me do any research, so I couldn't confirm whether or not time is fixed. He didn't want me anywhere near the subject, hoping it would preserve our family forever. Furious, I catch him flicking his hand, attempting to summon something. Nothing responds. Then, a look of confusion creases his brows. He must have thought I found a turner and tried to steal it from me. But I don't need to travel back in time... yet.

Draco overlooked one glaring flaw in his plan for utter denial. He didn't allow me access to books about time travel, but he gave me everything he could find on memory charms.

And I've been studying.

His mind is churning, trying to figure out what's happening. Then, a kernel of the correct guess begins to form. His eyes blow wide.

"Witch, don't you fucking dare."

The picture of what I intend to do is starting to form in his horrified gaze. His tone is caustic. He's holding his hand out so as not to spook me, and I feel the ache in his fingers to wrap them around my upper arm and never let go.

"I'll be back in just a few months. I'll return before you know it!" Tears fall as I try to get him to see reason.

With my admission, I feel Draco's surge of malice.

He narrows his eyes and seethes, "Hermione, you will not leave me and Genesis!"

Our bond is pulling with unbearable tension. We had six beautiful years. We found our home in one another and carved out a small piece of safety and security. When I fell for him, I dove through the sands of time, bumping along every iteration and parallel reality the universe could hold. His love is now etched into my very being. This man is my everything. I need him to know that before I do the unthinkable.

"I'm not!! I'm trying to save us! Draco please understand."

He hasn't moved yet. Draco is calculating all the possible ways to stop me, ready to pounce. But he's out of his realm of expertise. He would flick his wand and annihilate me if I were anyone else. He'd attack without hesitation. But I'm the love of his life, and he wants to avoid hurting me at all costs. He's stalking me. I can feel his mind grasping for ways to stop me—to force me to stay if he has to. He doesn't see the cosmic grip of time and fate the way I do. He never has.

"I'm trying to *save* us—" I repeat, hoping he will understand.

But Draco interrupts, "I DON'T GIVE A FUCK! WHAT YOU THINK YOU'RE SAVING!!!"

He's coming undone right in front of me. I'm leaving him again when his wound from the first time still blisters.

"I Love, you Draco! I have to—"

"*GOD DAMNIT, WITCH IF YOU FINISH THAT SENTENCE, I'LL—*"

I don't wait to hear the rest of his threat.

There's no amount of talking that will make this moment easier for him. I just need to get it over with. Plus, I have to surprise him in order to get away.

In a flash, I Apparate to the library, grab my copy of *Hogwarts: a History*, write a cryptic message on the cover page as hard as I can press. Then, I tear out the page, toss it into the fire, and point my wand in my face.

I needed to save enough memories to confuse and frighten myself over the next few months.

I've had a lot of time to think. I studied and collected all the memories that would confuse and scare me. I had plenty to work with, what with my memories, Draco's, and the ones the future me left behind. I jumbled and rearranged them to tell the story I want. I'm prepared.

Racing, I siphon the rest out and tilt the floating string of the past six years of our love into a glass phial. Then I vanish it to the penthouse as well.

"Confundus!" I yell, pointing the wand in my face and hoping to get this done before Draco slams through the door. Darting my eyes to the door in fear, I work as fast as I can. I only have a moment. He's coming.

My brain turns sluggish and fuzzy as the charm takes place. Then, I cast the final blow.

"Obliviate!"

Chapter 40: Life & Death

Chapter Summary

"You and I
Happy ending and a tragedy combined
But we both can't live without it and we try
We should take our own advice (mmm)
Don't give up
There's a mountain in the middle of the road
It'll take a little longer to get home
Baby, all we've got is time"
-Turbulence, Pink

May 2005

The lights are too bright.

A ringing in my ears won't clear, and I have a throbbing headache.

"W—what?"

I manage to sputter as Draco walks toward me. I barely register him cooing.

"Sis, this is your Mama."

The squirming, squishy baby holds her chubby arms to me, half-smiling and half-crying alligator tears as she babbles, "Mum Ummmmumum, Umm, ahh!"

"Shh," Draco bounces her, letting her continue to chew on his finger. "You're okay Sis. I'm here."

The baby fusses and twists, trying to get down. She arches her back and pushes against him, holding her arms out wider to me. "Mumumum!"

Curious, Draco cocks his head, taking in her reaction. Then he turns back to me. He gives me a once over, determining if my shock will make me unable to cope, but ultimately decides to do whatever is necessary to make the child stop crying.

He steps toward me, holding the little girl in front of his chest, and kisses my forehead.

"You're okay, too, love."

Then he plops the wailing girl into my arms. The baby quiets as she sniffles on her remaining tears and rests her head on my shoulder, calming herself with my warm hold and Draco's thumb still in her mouth.

Turning my wide-eyed gaze to him, I dart back and forth between him and the hazel-eyed girl as she pats my face.

Thwack, thwack thwack.

She hums and coos in relief.

Shrugging, Draco explains, "She's teething again." He lets out a sigh and brushes his hand through his hair. "It's her *ruddy* molars this time. I haven't been able to get away for long. She's been glued to me, every moment she's awake."

"I'll let you two talk," Narcissa Malfoy says, ducking out of the living room and heading down the hall.

I watch her go, listening to her heels clack on the tile. Then I raise my eyebrows to my hairline, glaring at Draco.

What the fuck?!

He chuckles an arrogant laugh. "Breathe, Hermione. You're turning purple."

"Muummmm MMaaa mauh." The child's eyes begin to soften as she calms.

Pop!

"Oh praises, Merlin!" Millie yelps, exasperated. She followed us to the penthouse and is relieved to see that the baby stopped wailing. "I'll go warm up a bottle," she squeaks, then heads to the kitchen to leave us in peace.

"Hermione?"

Thwack, thwack.

Draco places his hand on my cheek. His voice drops as he pulls me out of my stupor.

"Hermione?"

"W—what is this!?" I croak.

Bending to kiss my lips with gentle care, Draco says again. "Love, this is our daughter, Genesis Lyra." His tone is incredibly kind. He's looking at me with an ocean of affection in his eyes.

"I had a baby?"

"We have a baby," he confirms.

Draco drops his head to stare at the child, who is now nodding off in my hold. He rests his large hand on her small head and smiles. His devotion to her is evident. Then, pausing, he adds in awe, "She took to you immediately." He sounds somewhat shocked.

A leaden horror drops into my stomach. I continue to process everything while my breath catches. "Draco? How old is she?"

"One year and five months." He runs his hand down my arm as I piece together everything. Then he drops his voice to a whisper, growling, "The day you found the note in *Hogwarts: a History* she was nearly three months old."

Tears sting my eyes. The truth is clawing at me. "But, I don't remember her." I start to hyperventilate. I raise my watery doe eyes to him. "I don't remember being pregnant."

Throwing his arm around me, he kisses my head and orders, "She's asleep again. Come. Let's put her down."

I stare at the exhausted girl. She is still dragging deep breaths, but when the three of us finally reunited, she passed out—probably whipped out from her wailing.

He guides me through our former home. We head down the hall on the first floor and take a left into my old bedroom. As we enter what is now a nursery, I catch Narcissa sitting at a desk in what used to be our music room. It is a few doors down the hall and clearly now where she sleeps.

Draco leads me to Genesis's crib with a hand at my back and one around my body, helping me cradle our sleeping child. He holds his breath, faces me, and inches Genesis from my arms. When she doesn't wake up, he heaves a sigh of relief. Then, he places her onto the mattress with utmost care. He freezes after letting her go and waits, anticipating another scream. But she continues sleeping. It's like she's comforted by our presence.

When Genesis's chest rises and falls, it convinces Draco that she will stay asleep. Relieved, he joins me near the floor-to-ceiling window. He pulls me to an overstuffed armchair and settles me into his lap.

"That's your Mom?"

I've seen her likeness hanging on several walls in the Manor, but I don't remember ever meeting her.

With his arms around me, Draco rubs his thumb over the back of my hand. "I moved her here after imprisoning my Father." He shifts in the seat to settle me further into his hold, then continues. "They had been staying at a secluded vacation home in Riggs Moor. She was relieved." Draco clears his throat. "She never wanted to follow my Father into Voldemort's madness but, he was a hard man to say no to. She was glad to have him out of her life. I watched her blossom here."

"I don't understand," I cry, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "How did I have a baby? How is she only a year and a half? I remember the entire year before finding that note in *Hogwarts: a History*. Why is Genesis living here now? How does your Mom fit into the picture??"

Draco's body stiffens. I sense through the bond how raw these emotional wounds still are for him. "Genesis lives here now because you sent her here before wiping your own memories in February 2004 and forcing my hand. You don't remember the year before finding the note," he corrects me gently.

"What??" I'm starting to shake again.

Draco grasps my hand to soothe me as my mind explodes.

Then he explains, "What you actually remember are bits and pieces of the previous six years and even some memories I showed you from the future. It's crazy I know. But, I realized when you were so terrified of me over those four months that your memories were unreliable." He clears his throat. "I think you did what you could to scare yourself." Draco sounds pissed again.

I still, considering what this all means.

Taking a deep breath and calming himself down to continue, he says, "My Mother helps me care for Genesis. It hasn't been easy. Voldemort still calls for me at all hours. I was lucky to have more help than just Millie." Then, letting out a heavy sigh, I feel the bond warm as he hums into my neck.

"I think you know the answer to *how* you had my daughter."

Staring straight ahead with wide eyes I continue asking questions as if compelled.

"I wiped my memories!?"

Draco scowls, nodding a shallow affirmation. Then, he growls, "You were afraid of messing with time and losing our daughter." Hanging his head he adds, "I realize now that time is fixed, but I was so furious with you."

As if all the pieces of our tortured love story click into place, I begin to see the complete picture.

"Everything began with her," I whisper in awe.

The gleaming skyscrapers of London seem too bright and colorful as I stare out the window in astonishment. All the Muggles in the cars below have no idea how complicated life can get. They don't have to worry about time travel, fate, or devastating wizard wars.

"This all happened to save her and the Order."

"I don't know," Draco cautions me. "But she *was* the reason you wiped your memories. And she was why I was forced to see your plan through." A cloud of grief weighs on his shoulders as he admits. "It was like walking through a nightmare as I acted out memories I first witnessed in the pensieve years ago. I knew what to do, but I hated myself for it. I hated you for putting me in that position. I wanted to get it over with as fast as I could to get you back."

I pull in a tight breath, realizing, "I thought I would come back to July 2004. I thought I wasn't going to be gone *this* long."

I refuse to believe that I was okay with abandoning my daughter for over a year.

A shiver runs up my spine as Draco places his forehead on the back of my hair. He is reliving the pain he experienced over the past ten months as he says, "I think you're right." He squeezes me tighter in anguish. "But, you didn't tell me. You lied to me and left me—us!" he pauses, and we both take in the gravity of our storyline. "You told Millie you would be back in four months. That would have been just after I found you at Order Headquarters." My stomach drops. "Yes, I think you assumed you would be back sooner." He growls, "I know I did."

Continuing to stare out the window into nothingness, I get lost in several thoughts. I imagine Draco keeping up the rouse that he is still Voldemort's loyal servant, waiting every day for me to return and going crazy with worry, all while fathering our daughter.

Why the hell would we have added a baby to our dangerous story?

"Was she planned?" I dart my eyes back to the crib. "Did we *want* to have a kid?"

Draco's spike of frustration tightens my shoulders. "Those are two very different questions." He takes a deep breath to calm himself and then adds, "We didn't plan for her, no. But she was very much wanted." Then, huffing a sour laugh, he qualifies his answer: "Well, at least after I walked you through your shock and panic."

My mind churns as he takes a steadying breath. Draco kisses my neck, then tilts my head back with a finger and tenderly kisses my lips. "I seem to help you through your panic pretty often," he hums, noting how my heart still races.

A baby.

Genesis changes everything.

I turn to see her plump sleeping form. She has tucked her legs underneath her, and her backside is up in the air. It's a strange way to sleep, but she looks happy and content.

Do I want a baby?

I sit with that question for a bit, then close my eyes and check in with my magical core. My connection to Draco was strong in every timeline, but something felt incomplete. At first, I worried it was because Draco was lying to me and holding me captive, but then I assumed it was because I was deceiving him after I traveled back in time. While with Draco in the past, the bond felt the strongest, but there was always a touch of sadness or worry. I seemed to know that I wasn't meant to stay with him.

But now—

The room smells intoxicating. I take in Draco's signature allure mixed with Genesis— it's sweeter and fresh. The warmth in my core and the sensations I get from my other senses take over. I feel Draco's comforting hold, hear her tiny purrs of slumber, and touch the soft fabric of the chair under my wandering fingertips. I'm overcome with a surge of magical connection. All at once, it feels like everything is right. Everything is finally set in place.

My bonded partner watches me with a knowing smile. He senses it, too.

"She's asleep. Come with me."

"Draco—," I breathe.

He stands, pulls me into his arms, and kisses me. It adds to the moment, and the magic I feel swirls within me. I melt into his strong embrace, his lips, and how he threads his steady fingers in my curls. This is it. This is what I was chasing.

Turning to walk out the door, Draco doesn't let go of my hand. He guides me out of the nursery, down the hall, and up the wide stairs to our room. My eyes are locked on his reassuring, lust-filled smile. It has a tinge of arrogance in it that makes me squirm. As soon as we enter the large suite, Draco waves his hand to wandlessly obscure all the windows, and provide us some privacy.

When he turns back to me, I jump into his arms.

I wrap my arms around his neck as he hums his approval and lifts me from the floor. My panic gave way to a rush of heat and desire. I want to consume him. This man held steady. He carried our love throughout years of confusion and torment. He guided us to this point and saved me from myself when I wanted to stay in 1998 and throw everything off track. He loved me throughout everything. He fathered my child —was a single parent while I was *gone*. He brought our family back together.

I devour him as he turns and presses me up against the wall. His hands are everywhere. They glide up my body and around my neck. They brush over my curls and down my back.

"Hermione," he hums in an anguished plea. "I see it now." He kisses me again. "I hated you for it at times, but you saved us." He's hungry for me. Our bond pulls tight and feels like it is about to snap with the tension of our unending love for one another.

Draco hasn't shaved. He was too busy comforting our daughter all night and didn't get enough sleep. His 5 O'clock shadow is scruffy against my skin, and it makes me laugh. It's a sensation I have never felt in all the times we've made love, and it's oddly attractive. He's typically so clean-cut. But now he is disheveled due to his steady care and devotion to our baby.

"You're tired," I mewl. "This can wait." I'm panting as Draco kisses my neck and presses himself between my legs. "You should get some sleep."

I throw back my head as he moves to the sensitive spot near my collarbone that always makes me wet when he sucks on it just right.

"No more talking, witch." he raises his head to kiss me and nips my bottom lip. "I'll tell you when I'm too tired to fuck my wife." His voice rumbles in my chest.

Draco slides his hand under my shirt and around my back. He reaches to unclasp my bra with the flick of his fingers, and I feel my heavy breasts drop slightly in response. Then, shivers shoot from my head to my toes as he runs his hand back to my front, dips beneath my bra, and ghosts his thumb over my nipple.

My core begins to warm and tingle at the feel of his skilled fingers. I'm sensitive to every touch and dying for him to sink into me. But first, Draco lifts my shirt, bends, and pulls my swollen nipple into his mouth. He sucks and glides his fat tongue over me, biting down gently and causing me to moan in pleasure.

I can't wait any longer. I have to have him inside of me. Something is driving me to seat him within my core and connect on a primal level.

I drop my hands to his pants, undo the button, and slide down the zipper. I sense the moment Draco removes my shorts with magic, but I'm not sure how or when he did it because he is still pressing me to the wall and flicking my tit with his tongue. As soon as I finger my drenched panties and yank them to the side, Draco reaches down to fist his cock, dragging it over the seam of his boxers, and he answers my unspoken desires. I suck in a tight breath as his thick, raging shaft forces its way into my waiting gusset.

Letting out a deep groan, Draco pumps into me with just his fat tip housed within my channel. The teasing movement sends electric waves of arousal along both of our bodies. The way he moves his expert length back and forth into me while pressing me tight to the wall causes his shaft to rub along my hungry clit. Then I see stars.

"We're together for good now," my worked-up husband insists. He slides his cock in and out of me, and I'm slick from his advance. Concentrating on him is hard, but I know he wants me to listen. "No more running, Hermione," he demands. "You're home now."

I'm home.

He thrusts into me to the hilt and then grabs me to carry me to the bed. As he marches across the room, he is still lodged inside of me. It causes my breath to catch as I jostle around on his cock with my legs wrapped around his middle. It's too much. I start rolling my hips to chase the delicious friction.

My fevered mind races as I start to rise higher and higher on a cloud of pleasure. Draco doesn't mean I'm home at this penthouse or even in this time frame. What he means is that I'm home with him. That our family is back together and complete. That we can begin to heal. A tear gathers in my eyes as I realize how much I needed to hear that reassurance.

However, I don't have time to focus on my sentimentality because Draco drops me onto our bed and vanishes the rest of our clothes. I take in his heaving chest as he stands next to the bed, devouring me with his heated gaze. He runs a hand through his hair, and I see the muscles twitch in his arm. This man is chiseled perfection. I drink him in while raising my feet slowly to lay flat on the mattress. Then, with my knees bent and my back to the bed, I open my legs to him and close them again, offering up the visible evidence of my need. I'm a sopping mess.

Draco's eyes heat as he watches me present my wet cunt to him. He takes a deep breath and then moves closer to the bed to grab the inside of my thigh. I keen as he holds my legs still and open for him to spread my swollen lips wide and finger my pussy.

"Gods, you're gorgeous," he says in a low raspy voice. "Look at you. You're dying for my cock."

I lower my lashes and stare at him beneath my lids. Then I bite my lower lip and nod in agreement.

He swipes his thumbs through my folds to circle my tingling bundle of nerves and then grazes over me. I roll my head back, trying not to cum on his hand. I want to hold off, but I'm so hot.

"I should knock you up again to make sure you stick around for at least the next year," he teases while fisting his thick shaft. He runs his hands along his length, then asks, "Would you like that, love?" He leans to capture my nipple in his mouth again, and as he does, his wide head presses against my clit, hard and velvety smooth. "Want me to remind you what being round with my seed is like?"

I would do anything for him right now. I would have all the kids he wants as long as that meant we could be together, and I could stay beneath him like this for the rest of time.

"Someday," I whisper. "But, I'm not going anywhere."

Draco flips me over and slams into me. I lick my lips and pant as he spreads me wide. He's a perfect stretch, a perfect fit. We were made for each other in every way.

"No, you're not," he orders, emphasizing his point with a deep thrust and smacking my ass hard!

I lay with my breasts firm against the mattress and my face pushed into the sheets. The gentle friction of the soft fabric licks my nipples as a pooling of warmth grows in my lower abdomen. I will never get enough of the way that Draco owns me. I am wholly and completely his, and he is mine. And, the way he controls my body while taking me is divine. My breath catches as he fists my hair and starts rutting into me in a sinful rhythm.

He pistons in and out of me, growing harder and harder with each snap of his hips. Moaning, I reach my hand back to fondle his heavy balls. Draco roars and shoves his hand under my

thrusting hips. He grasps my hand and presses it to my sex. I shiver as his large hand captures mine in place, guiding me to bring myself off. He glides our hands over my silky cunt, then adjusts our fingers to pinch my clit.

Together, we climb higher towards a blissful release. He thumps into me and continues rubbing my small fingers over my sex as I roll my hips. We are suspended in the air, riding out our pleasure with each other's bodies, using one another, and offering ourselves up.

Everything freezes.

It's a tight, heavy, exciting feel of anticipation. Both of us hold our breath.

And then we explode. Stars cross my vision, and I yell out a shameless plea. I ride the torrent of molten desire and slow my movements, dragging out every last inch of the blessed gush. Draco fists the bedpost and his arms cord. He is so lost in the feeling that he looks pained.

"Fuck!"

His voice is gravelly. He whispers the praise, and it is hardly more than a rumble. But I can feel through the bond how much his mind-numbing orgasm is crashing through his body. The mirrored sensation courtesy of our bond sends us both into endless waves of heat and gratification. I'm limp and weightless, feeling his length pump into my sex and his spend run down my leg. He continues to press his strong hand to mine over my clit, and my pulse beats a fast tattoo on our fingers.

One final wave rolls through us, and we suck in a tight breath in unison. Draco thrusts once, twice, three times more, and then our explosive orgasms finally wane. We catch our breath. I feel him pull from my sex and whine at the new feeling of emptiness. Draco huffs a laugh in response.

Bending, he trails soft kisses up my bare back, then sucks on my neck once more, asking, "Feeling better?"

"That's an understatement." My voice still sounds breathy and wanton. It makes my cheeks warm.

After a beat, I flip over and eventually stand. I head to the ensuite to shower, but Draco grabs my wrist and orders, "Not yet." He summons his wand and then vanishes the mess before crawling into bed and pulling me into his arms.

Our core hums and our heartbeats synchronize as we enjoy the feeling of laying naked together.

"You really should sleep," I whisper, running my hands over his face and tracing the scar above his eye.

"Sis, kept me up all damn night. She was inconsolable anywhere other than in my arms." Draco winces at the memory.

"Sis?" I ask, surprised by the nickname.

He smiles.

"That's what I call her." Then he pauses before admitting, "You call her Gen."

And, just like that, tears well up in my eyes. I think back to all the time I've missed and how fractured my journey has been. I'm incredibly thankful to have arrived at this reality with a loving and caring Draco, not the monster I feared him to be, but now I ache to have lived through all the tiny moments of her life.

"Shh," Draco soothes. "Don't cry. You're home, and I'm going to show you everything." He chokes up as his eyes start to water as well. I've never seen him cry, so it causes me to freeze. "We're together again." He kisses my wet lips. We're both feeling all the intense minute details of our love story. It is almost incapacitating. Our hearts crash the same heavy beat, perfectly aligned. "We're together from here on out."

Draco is exhausted. I can feel how heavy his chest is and how hard he is working to stay awake. We have all the time in the world now to dissect what happened. But he needs to pass out.

"Sleep." I kiss his jaw. "I'll stay with you until she wakes, and then I'll get to know our daughter." Draco heaves a deep, grateful sigh. The lines around his eyes loosen, and he looks at me with unending devotion. "Sleep. You've done so well, Draco. You've held us together." I run my hands along his forehead. "You kept us safe." My voice breaks with how touched I am. "You've earned it. Get some sleep."

The kiss Draco lays on my lips carries all the love and gratitude he can possibly offer. He holds my cheek and lets me know how much I am cherished and how much he is committed to me. It's perfect.

"I love you," he says, pulling me closer and finally resting.

Over the next week, I am entirely consumed with my family. I scoop Gen up whenever she raises her hands to me, saying, "Up!" and hold her, buffeting us against all odds. I feed and change her, put her to sleep, and then stay to hear her little purrs of happiness.

All talk of ending Voldemort gets put on hold while I bond with my daughter. We hunker down in the penthouse together and enjoy being a family. Draco even moves his Mom to the Manor for the time being so that we can be alone, which she is happy to oblige.

"Of course, Darling," she says the day after I met Gen. Then she packs a bag and heads for the fireplace. I poke my head out of the nursery when she's about to leave. I haven't officially met her yet. She's tall and stately, and something about her seems inviting. She catches me staring and smiles, saying, "It's very good to have you home, Ms. Granger."

"*Malfoy*, Mother!" Draco hollers from the kitchen.

"Yes, of course. Sorry, Darling. Mrs. Malfoy," she corrects herself as they both give each other an impish grin. Then she waggles her fingers to wave goodbye.

Genesis is happy and smiley with her parents both attending to her. Draco is confused at first by how fast she warms up to me despite my long absence, but we both decide it's likely the bond connecting us all. Innately, she knows I'm her Mom. After that, we don't care about bringing it up again.

Draco plays with her on the floor each night while I make dinner, which causes my heart to melt. One night, he charms a stuffed Griffin to soar above Gen while she claps and coos. Touched, I wave my wand, conjuring a yellow bird and then sending it over to join the fun. It makes Draco smile as well. He leans back to look at me, and we share a sweet, silent moment of intimate connection.

Each night, after Gen finally nods off, we fuck as though we're starved for one another. It's as if now that we know the full picture, we feel even more connected than ever. Then, while we hold each other following each surge of pleasure, we try to connect all the dots that brought us to that moment.

"So, I *had* to be afraid of you to run away and collect the resurrection stone and cloak!"

Draco inevitably injects sarcastically, "And there was *NO* other way to accomplish that task!?"

"No way that would be as safe if Voldemort searched my memories... Which he did!"

Or, "You were still a right Bastard when I came back to 2005! Why??" I ask with my arms folded on his chest, resting my chin in the crook.

Draco brushes my hair behind my ears.

"At that point I knew time was fixed but I was still pissed. But more than that, I needed you to act afraid of me in front of Nott and Zabini and I didn't have enough time to catch you up."

Then we wake the next morning to cuddle and care for our daughter as if there aren't dangers lurking beyond our doors.

However, one day, forgetting myself, I ask, "Draco, let's take her for a stroll through the park. Do you have a carrier?"

His sad eyes bring me back down from my lofty world of escapism and denial. He doesn't tell me no. He doesn't say whether or not he's *ever* taken our baby outside. He doesn't remind me that there's no way in hell he would let *me* outside of his wards—or, at least, there isn't until Voldemort is dead. All he does is roll his lips and take my hand. He knows how much that slip-up tears through my heart.

Later that evening, he holds me after taking me passionately. While we lay together, coming down from the high, I stew. I run my fingers back and forth over his chest and ask, "You've been home a lot. Has that Bastard not been calling for you?"

Draco tenses then admits, "I'm through doing his bidding." He kisses the top of my head. "I haven't reported for work since you moved back in with me."

"What!?" I push up to stare at him in shock. "He's going to murder you, Draco! What are you talking about!?"

Kissing me and standing to go put clothes on, he says, "No, I'm going to kill him." Then, quipping over his shoulder, he says, "I thought that was the plan."

I jump up and follow him to the closet. "So you're just going to piss him off before you attempt to take him down? Aren't you giving away your element of surprise?" I cross my arms and fume.

The problem is that I'm still naked.

Draco turns, and his eyes lick up my body. Then he shakes his head and rubs the back of his neck.

"Love, get out of here unless you want to be on your back again."

I grab a bathrobe off the hanger and wrap myself in it. Tying the knot, I insist, "We need to return to our plans to end him."

"Hermione —,"

It's a warning.

Draco pulls his shirt over his head, barking, "I told you that you're not involved in the rest of the plan."

"Oh come on, Draco stop being ridiculous. Of course you need help."

"Witch! Leave it alone!" His tone cracks through the air.

As his admonishment settles among us, we stand in silence, and I formulate my stinging response. I open my mouth to object.

Just then, Genesis wakes and cries out for us.

Rolling his shoulders and thankful for the interruption, Draco orders, "I'll get Sis." He leaves me fuming in the closet. "Go to bed."

"Draco!" I yell.

But he ignores me and heads out the door.

Hours later, Draco wakes me with a kiss.

"Hermione, hey,"

I wake and try to blink away the sleep dust in my eyes, but I feel fuzzy and disoriented.

"What time is it?" I push up to my elbows, trying to get my bearing straight. "Do you want me to take over with Gen?"

"No. Actually, my Mom is here to listen out for her."

Rearing back, I furrow my brows and ask, "Why?"

He shrugs. "I thought you could use a good night's sleep."

Giving him an incredulous stare, I ask, "And you woke me up to tell me that?"

Draco kisses me. His soft lips pull me from my sour mood after being awoken so abruptly. "No, I roused you to take this." He pulls a small phial out of his pocket and pops the cork with one hand. "Open up." Draco reaches toward me and tilts my chin up, ready to help me down whatever is in his hand.

"What?!" I pull back. "What is this?"

The look he gives me is a blistering reprimand. "Hermione, don't argue with me."

I shake my head in confusion. "I'm not arguing. I just don't understand."

"You don't need to understand. You just need to do as you're told." He reaches toward me again. "You trust me, right?"

Of course, I do. Draco has proven his loyalty to me time and time again. He has protected me, fought off assailants for me, and come running back to me after every argument, no matter how big. He has sheltered me in his home and in his arms for years.

I take in his heated expression and wonder if this is some game. Am I going to enjoy this?

I scour his features.

No, he doesn't seem aroused.

Before he has a chance to offer another bossy warning, I hesitate for a second longer, then nod. I lean towards him and hold his hand as he dips the dark liquid into my mouth. I can't tell if it's blue or purple, and it doesn't have a smell. It tastes smokey. Draco holds my head and keeps tilting the bottle upward as I drink.

"Good girl," he says when I've downed the whole bottle. He catches a drop of potion with his thumb, then guides it past my lips. Then he stands to leave.

"Alright, now tell me," I grouch, wiping my arm across my mouth. "What was that?"

Draco stomps around to my side of the bed and crouches down to my eye level. He looks so arrogant and condescending that it makes me nervous.

Why is he fully dressed? ... And in his dragonhide battle robes?

"That, my love, was the Draught of Living Death." He brushes my hair out of my eyes as I feel my stomach drop to my feet. He kisses my shocked lips, then adds, "You're right. I've put it off long enough."

"What!?! What are you talking about!?" I yawn, which causes me to spike with anger. "You drugged me, you Bastard!" I push back the covers to stand but feel like my limbs are made of lead as the potion starts to kick in. "What do you mean *you've waited long enough*? And, why the hell did you ply me with the—," I yawn again. "Most potent—" yawn, "Sleeping draught!"

Guiding me back to the pillow, Draco clarifies, "I'm going to go kill Voldemort, and you my meddling, impulsive, prone-to-making-horrible-decisions wife, are going to stay in my god dammed bed and let me handle something for once."

Panic grips me, causing me to grasp for him as he stands. My eyes are drooping, but I can't let him do this. We haven't prepared. We haven't planned. He's putting his life in danger and is forcing me to *sleep through it!!!*

My breath catches in my throat.

Oh gods, what if he doesn't come back?

"No, Draco, stop!" I'm crying and bubbling, but I can't lift my head. "Please don't. I'm scared."

He won't stop.

"Don't leave me!!!"

As he walks toward the door, my last comment stops him. His shoulders fall, and he huffs out a sour laugh. Then he returns to kiss me one last time. "Sucks, doesn't it?" he smiles. Then, brushing off his irritation, he threads his fingers through my hair.

I fall asleep to him, saying, "I'll be back. I promise. I love you."

I bolt upright, gasping for air.

Clutching at my throat, I dart my eyes around our room. It's early morning, and the light from the windows is soft. When I jump, taking in everything around me, I find a bottle of Wigenweld Potion sitting on the bedside table.

I take another sharp breath as what happened in the middle of the night comes rushing back.

Draco! Oh, my gods! Oh, my gods!

I swipe my eyes and burst out of bed, unsure what to do with myself or how to stop him.

Then I register the shower running.

I tiptoe to the ensuite, afraid of what I might find as the steam swirls around the door. When I turn the corner into the bright room, I throw my hands up to my mouth and yelp.

"Draco!"

He's standing in the shower wearing his jeans and boots. One hand is holding up his weight against the wall, and his head hangs in fatigue. The water beats down on him over his shoulders and down his back, where a violent burn covers half his naked torso. It's red and jagged. The sight of it makes me nauseous.

"Holy hell, what did he do to you? What happened?"

I run to him and into the falling water without a care for my clothes. He doesn't move, so I duck under his arms and cradle his strong jaw in my hands, imploring him to look at me. "Are you okay?" I cry. "I'll have Millie call for a healer. But, tell me you're okay!" When he doesn't answer at first, my hands shake in fear. "Draco!" I yell, trying to get through to him. Water beats down on us, drenching the white negligee I wrote to bed. But I couldn't care less.

His piercing eyes shoot open as my heart leaps into my throat. He's exhausted again, heaving deep, shuttered breaths. I watch his chest rise and fall as he closes his eyes again for a second, then opens them, wincing.

"No Healer."

His directive doesn't make sense.

"But, your back? It's — it's —"

"It's ripped to shreds," he coughs, then grabs me and pulls me to the shower floor. He guides me into his lap as we slump on the ground, then hangs his head on my shoulder. I'm curled into a ball as he cradles me, and the water rains down on us. "Severus stopped the curse. It's as healed as it's going to get."

We hold each other silently for a long time as Draco shudders, hurt and bone-weary. After several long minutes I cry, "How could you? Do you have any idea how scary that was for

me!?" Then, a thought occurs. "Wait! Do we need to run? Are we safe!?"

Lifting his head, he purrs, "No." He kisses me. "We never need to run again."

"W—what about Potter?"

My question is a painful mix of shock, terror, and tightly wound hope.

"He's okay." Draco brushes his thumb across my temple, staring at me as I struggle to breathe. "It's a long story," he coughs again, then takes a shuttered breath and continues, "I'll explain how later, but Severus and I put everything together. I had to take him out beforehand." He pauses, wincing. "But he's okay."

I freeze, holding my breath and daring not to hope. When he speaks next, I burst into manic tears of joy.

"He's gone. Hermione, he's gone. We did it."

I kiss him and laugh into his mouth, running my hands over his torso, neck, and hair. I'm jittery from the relief. "He's gone?"

Draco wraps his hand behind my neck and kisses me one more time.

"He's gone."

A few hours later, I'm bouncing Genesis in her nursery. Her head is on my shoulder as she babbles away. I've been moving through life on autopilot, unsure how to process what Draco

told me.

"Voldemort is dead," I whisper to my daughter. It's the first time I've said the words out loud.

After I pulled my husband from the shower— dripping wet and weighed down by his soggy pants and boots— I helped him change and made sure that he made it to the bed okay. Then, I went downstairs and headed to Gen's room. When she heard my footsteps, Narcissa cracked her door open, asking, "Is he okay?" She stumbled over the short sentence in her anxiety.

"He's okay," I said. Then, whispered in disbelief, "He did it."

Narcissa let out a heavy sigh of relief, clutching her chest, which betrayed her composure. Then she nodded at me and clicked the door shut. It was clear she was giving me space to be with Gen.

Now, I kiss her little cheek as she snuggles into me and pat her back, letting out a giant yawn. I'm still waking up from the potion, and definitely still sour.

"Hey,"

I turn to find Draco standing in the doorway. He looks a bit more rested but still weak.

"Draco, how could you do that to me?"

It all worked out in the end, but I feel so betrayed.

He walks across the room and wraps me in his arms, kissing Genesis's head. He pulls her from my arms and places her on the rug next to a pile of her toys.

Then he explains, "You were right. I needed to stop playing house and just get it over with. I should have done it right away, but I couldn't leave your side after introducing you to Genesis." He rubs his warm hands up and down my arms as he talks. "There have been too many times in my life where you did some kind of heroic asinine stunt during crises." Lowering his voice, he admits, "I know it was wrong, but I couldn't do what I needed to do while worried you might chase after me or put yourself in danger somehow."

He clears his throat and adds, "I needed to do it myself." I turn to face him and see the tortured expression in his eyes. "That fucking sociopath destroyed my life. He made me do —" Draco has difficulty finishing his sentence, so I squeeze his hand to let him know I'm with him and he's safe. "He forced me to do things that will haunt me for the rest of my life. I became evil because of him." A shiver runs up my spine as I think about everything Draco did to remain safe and under the radar as a double agent. He takes a final deep breath and repeats, "I needed to do it myself. And I needed to make sure you were safe in order for me to be able to focus and get it done."

Genesis holds a stuffed hippo up for me to see, drawing my attention.

"Mama!"

In response, I bend to nuzzle her cheek, making her squeal as I reflect on everything. It wasn't a clear path to victory. Draco and I lost a lot and were forced to do horrible things to end Voldemort's evil reign.

But it's done now. He's actually gone.

"Hermione?"

Draco ghosts his thumb down my cheek to wake me from my churning thoughts.

"Yes?"

He summons something from the closet and holds out a long length of soft, sage-colored fabric.

"Let's take our daughter for a walk through the park."

A tear crests my eyelids and over my cheek. I'm overcome with love for my husband and joy for the world that we will finally be able to enjoy together. Everything is finally done and settled. We can lead a normal, happy life, and Genesis will grow up blissfully unaware.

"I love you," I whisper, crying in earnest now.

Draco holds me and kisses my temple. "Shh, love. You're okay. I'm here with you."

THE END

Chapter 41: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

"So thank you for all the memories
'Cause you'll never know what it meant to me
'Cause you were the one who gave me peace
When I had none left
Held me close at my loneliest
Thanks for the memories
Here's to the memories"
-Memories, Dean Lewis

Chapter Notes

Oh my goodness, friends.

I cannot tell you how overcome I am with your kindness. Your comments and support mean the world to me. Thank you for staying with this piece and for loving it. I hope this epilogue is a satisfying cap to this work for you.

This story gave me hell at times. I second guessed myself throughout each step of the writing process and you all kept me going. I look forward to my next work. I have a few ideas but am waiting for the inspiration on which I will pour my time into. But, please subscribe so that you get the notifications when I do post next.

One last note: I will say it again. This story, and Hermione and Draco's relationship is NOT a playbook for a healthy relationship. In fact in MANY ways it is incredibly toxic. It is an escape into a world that we can imagine and delve into and then close the book afterwards. It is a safe way to explore our fantasies. But, real love is a partnership!

I wish you all the very best reading and escaping into the magical world of Harry Potter until we meet again!

Daily Prophet

June, 15, 2005

Order Restored to the Wizarding Community

In the double entendre of the century, the wizarding world continues to heal and celebrate after years of oppressive leadership. And now, the late Albus Dumbledore's secret rebel cell, known as the Order of the Phoenix, has been revived from their petrified state.

What's even more lucky for our readers? We got their first interviews!

"I'm still trying to wrap my mind around what happened," Arthur Weasley, former Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, recounts. "Yes, we'd been working with the Order for years to stop He-Who-Must-Not-Be...oh, nevermind, damn it, Voldemort. We'd been working to stop Voldemort and we arrived at Hogwarts for the battle. Everything was chaos. We heard Harry [Potter] was dead, and then I watched as several stunners shot through the air and hit us all at once. We were too shocked to fight back. Anyway, the next thing I know, Draco Malfoy was plying me with a potion, we fell asleep and woke up to the happy news that Voldemort died. Honestly, I'm still in shock. We lost seven years!"

Weasley shares a sentiment we all felt after a seemingly never-ending eternity under He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's rule. Everyone in wizarding Britain was shocked by the sudden end of the nefarious leader after years of anguish.

But, what of the other Order members? Our reporters kept digging, and this is what Remus Lupin, a former teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and known werewolf, had to say:

"I won't answer any questions about the events that led to his demise. It was a long, complicated, arduous process. It spanned many years and included many people — not the least of which, folks that you wouldn't expect. The news will come out over time, and for now I want to be left alone to my wife and family."

Like our readers, we at the Daily Prophet are desperate to hear all the details. We strive to uncover them in the coming weeks, but for now, the Order members mostly just want

to get back to their lives. Here is a comment from a member who was even less interested in sharing the ins and outs.

"Get away from me. Where's Ginny? I mean it, leave me alone!"

Who was that, you might ask? Well, that was none other than Harry Potter himself. He was unwilling to chat, but we still send him our greatest gratitude for ending this long and horrible war!

As we mentioned, stay tuned for further updates. There will be much more to report on the celebrations and governmental shifts.

Until then!

Draco tosses the paper on the coffee table, drawling, "Yes, Potter. Thank *him*. He was so instrumental."

As I pace, I brush off his sarcasm. I'm anxious. I already read the article, and it didn't say much. I'm more concerned with our plans for the afternoon.

"They're not going to give you the credit. We already know that," I roll my eyes. "We should just be happy that they are expunging your record. We don't need accolades. I don't even want them! I have enough to manage without reporters in my face."

"I know that," Draco says, pushing on his knees to stand up from the couch. "It's just..." He waves his hand in disgust at the paper and runs his hands through his hair, groaning, "Potter! It's always Bloody, Potter!"

I stop pacing and meet him in the middle of the living room. We're standing by the fireplace at the penthouse. Narcissa took Gen to play in the playground at the Manor, watching her while we will be away today. I wrap my hands around his neck and try to soothe his frustration.

"I know who *really*, ended the war," I say, raising to my toes to kiss him.

Draco hums his approval. "Yes, both of us." He winds his hand into my hair and deepens our kiss. I feel my heart rate pick up in response. "Are you sure you want to go?" he teases.

"Honestly, no, I'm not," I drop from his hold to continue pacing and chewing on my nails.

Giving me a knowing smile, Draco casts a Tempus and then places a hand on my back to guide me to the fireplace. "It's time." I slow, still unsure, but he keeps moving. "I know you're scared, but you need to go."

After gathering my courage, we step through the flames and out into a homey living room. The place is dim, but the light from the windows makes it look inviting. There's handmade artwork on the walls and a basket of knitting by an armchair. Laying on the steps to the floors above sits what looks like potion supplies, sweets, and *rubber wands*? No one is inside, which gives me a minute to take a breath.

Draco squeezes my hand and then guides me out to the yard, where several voices are excitedly chatting. When we step into the bright sunlight of Weasley's garden, all the talking ceases. Roughly twenty pairs of wide eyes stare at us from where everyone is sitting around a courtyard of cafe tables.

I consider turning around and leaving, but then catch Remus as he stands and walks over to us. The sight of my friend helps me to relax a bit. He meets Draco and me at the garden gate and holds out his hand. Draco looks cold and uncomfortable, but he shakes it nonetheless.

"Welcome, we're so glad you could make it," Remus says.

Draco nods, and Remus turns to me. He shakes my hand with a little more vigor and pulls me in for a one-armed hug. "You certainly outdid yourself, Ms. Granger."

I offer a teary smile in return, so glad that Draco was able to save Remus as well. After everyone woke up, my Order friend was the chief defendant of Draco's innocence. It turns out Draco revealed the plot to Remus before convincing him to play along. When everyone woke, Remus was Draco's biggest champion. I don't know what would have happened without him. However, I know it would have been much more challenging to convince everyone of Draco's support of the Order. My chest warms, knowing he is reunited with his wife.

"Right! Well," Nymphadora Tonks juts out her hand. "You saved all of us and killed the old Bastard." I shake it, and then she turns to Draco. When she grasps his hand and pumps it up and down, he looks at me like he wants to be rescued. "I think that deserves a drink!"

Turning back to the gathered group, she summons her drink from the table, holds it high, and cheers, "To Hermione! for doing her damndest to keep us all alive!"

Everyone raises their glasses and yells their agreement. As I scan the crowd, I see some people I remember from newspaper clippings and my small interactions with them. They're scrutinizing my expression, probably looking for signs of recognition.

"And to Malfoy Jr. here," she announces, with a little more teasing edge in her voice.

Draco winces.

"—For not offing us like he did the old snake!"

"Here, here," they clap, sounding a little less enthusiastic.

Despite my worries, the afternoon goes well. I feel most comfortable finding a seat at one of the small tables with Draco by my side; therefore, folks come over one by one and introduce themselves to me. Mostly, everyone looks at me in that same sort of searching manner that I'm accustomed to at this point. They want to see if *I'm* still here with them, and I have no idea how to answer that question. But, the conversations move along as the sun begins to set.

At some point, when I feel more at ease, Draco walks away to give me some space and sits at a table with Bill Weasley. They make awkward small talk for a minute, and then Bill says something that makes Draco laugh. Suddenly, they both look more relaxed.

Mrs. Weasley gives me a great, wet, blubbering hug. It makes me want to squirm away, but something changes when she cries, "Oh, you lovely witch. Hermione, you've become such an amazing young woman." I hug her tighter, and she says, "Thank you."

Her husband, Arthur, stands back and smiles. Afterward, he offers his hand to me, mumbling, "Nice to meet you again. And yes, thank you indeed." Then they step away.

Everyone is kind. These are good people. I can see why they were my friends. I chat with the near-giant I remember from the Forbidden Forest, then something like four red-headed Weasley brothers, one sister, and even an old lady named Figg. While we share pleasantries and small talk, I nibble on Molly's delicious homemade finger foods. Her pork pie and apple chutney are divine.

"Mione?"

Lost in thought, I'm startled to find Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter standing near my table. They've been hanging back all night. I drop my pastry and wipe my hands on my napkin, bumbling through how to interact with them.

"Hi, um, sit, please."

Feeling a spike of something cautious and sour, I glance at Draco. He's staring at the three of us while drinking amber meade and now chatting with Charlie Weasley and Remus.

"So, this is weird," Harry Potter blurts out. He sits and rubs the top of his jeans while puffing out a sigh.

"Yeah. It really is," I reply.

I indicate the other seat, welcoming Ronald Weasley to join us. Even though he's slow to accept, he eventually plops down, looking stiff.

"You don't remember anything?"

Feeling defensive, I bite back a little too harshly, answering Harry Potter's question.

"I remember lots, just not about you two."

They share a shocked look and seem to have some sort of nonverbal conversation. I'm starting to wish I could bolt. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Draco pushing off from his knees to stand.

"Well," my former best friend holds out his hand, "I'm Harry."

I shake it, feeling his warmth. Then Harry elbows Ronald.

"I'm Ron," he mutters. He doesn't offer his hand, so I roll my lips and wave feebly.

Harry asks, breaking the tension, "Did you help him take down Voldemort? How did he destroy all the Horcruxes?"

"Yeah I helped. Most of them were gone by the time of the final battle anyways. The Hallows are a longer story."

"Maybe for another time then, huh?" Harry smiles. He sips his glass of ale and asks, "Are you going to reverse your parents' memory charms soon. I bet that's first on your list."

My stomach flip-flops. I can't believe I didn't think of this before! These two might know what I did — where I hid them!

"Do you? " My question gets stuck in my throat. "Do you know where they are?" I hold my breath, waiting for him to respond and hoping that he can help me.

"Yeah, you sent them to Australia." Harry's eyes look sad, realizing I didn't remember that, but I'm elated.

"Thank you!" I can't wait to do more research when we get home. "That's really helpful, we'll be able to narrow our search now."

"Are you really with Malfoy!?" Ron interjects.

His anger surprises me. I shift to face him and take in his stiff, defensive posture. He's steeling himself for my answer.

Ugh, right. I maybe had a thing with him?

I furrow my brows, looking him up and down with a curious reflection. Before I can answer, he snaps out another angry question.

"Did you really have his fucking kid?" Ron's face is twisted with disdain.

"That's enough!"

Draco plops down next to me as I sputter for what to say. I thought this guy was supposed to be my friend, but he is clearly pissed at me. And the kicker is that it's over something I don't even recall. Sinking into myself, I reflect on how hard it must be for him if we had feelings for one another.

I turn to my frustrated husband, who rests his hand on the back of my neck, rubbing out my tension, and takes another sip of his drink. Then, with a cold nonchalance, he points his finger in Ronald's face while still clutching his tumbler.

"Be respectful," he warns.

"Fuck off, Ferret! You know she wanted nothing to do with you! It's a little suspicious you ended up together. One second we're running through the halls at Hogwarts and the next, *this*." He waves his hand between the two of us. "What did you do to her!? I don't believe for one second you switched *Bloody* sides!"

Everyone is staring and I have lost all my words. My cheeks warm as I feel ashamed.

My former self was so against the dark arts. Would she be disgusted with me like he is?

Draco kisses my temple and whispers, "Don't do that, love." Then he waves to the rest of the gathered crowd. "Everything's fine, folks."

Ron leans back, folding his arms. "Is it?"

At that, Draco leans in and spits, "Yeah, Weasley, I did something." He looks predatory and pissed. It's so evident that these three didn't get along before. That hasn't changed. I'm still struggling to figure out what to say as Draco offers an arrogant challenge, "Want me to go into detail about when *she* got me to fall in love with her? It's a pretty hot story." Draco smirks like the arrogant ass he can be and finishes, "—begged me to take her after three days. —the witch is insatiable." Leaning in a bit further, he sneers, "Maybe that's how she ended up with my *fucking* kid."

"Draco!" I snap, astonished by his behavior.

Ron stands, knocking over his drink as he shouts, "You definitely drugged her or something, Death Eater rapist!"

"Woah, woah, woah!" Harry shoves his hand in between Draco and Ron. At the same time, Remus and Arthur head over to our table.

"Everything okay?" Remus asks, knowing it isn't. "Ronald, why don't you and I have a chat."

I stare at Draco, aghast, and whisper out of the side of my mouth, "What's gotten into you?"

Draco stands and holds his hand out to me. "It's time to go, love."

Flustered, I turn to Harry, "Will you come to the Manor sometime so that we can chat more?"

"Uh, the Manor?" Harry looks uncomfortable. "Sure, Hermione, we'll find another time to talk when things have cooled down." Then he leans in and says, "Ron will come around."

"What a relief!" Draco says, dripping with sarcasm while brushing off his clothes and preparing to leave. "We're waiting on baited breath to spend more time with him."

I scowl at Draco but take his outstretched hand and offer a *sorry this got awkward* shrug to Harry. He shakes it off, indicating everything is fine.

"Cheers, Potter. You're less of a prick. Feel free to stop by my house sometime."

My eyebrows fly upwards, and I turn to scowl at my possessive husband, then back to Harry with a pained look. Harry shoots me another, *really it's fine* look, then says, "Sounds good, Malfoy. And by the way, thanks."

Draco is already a few feet away, but Harry's comment stops him in his tracks. He turns and furrows his brows as if seeing Harry differently.

"You got us over the finish line, not me." Harry waves goodbye, then walks back toward a seething Ron.

"Huh?" Draco says, pleasantly surprised.

Draco immediately bends to hoist Gen into the air when we walk back through the flames. "There's my girl!" He kisses his Mom's cheek, adding, "Thanks, Mom," while tossing our giggling child into the air.

Narcissa heads back to the Manor, leaving Draco and I sitting on the living room floor. An hour later, he's lying on his side, moving a toy train around for Gen, and I'm picking at my nails in frustration.

"Stop that, Hermione." Draco places his hand over mine.

I let out a heavy sigh, then huff, "Well that was terrible. Why did you have to act so puffed up and jealous?"

Scowling and making a quiet, disgusted sound, Draco stares at me. "I wasn't jealous. I didn't like the way he was talking to you and about Genesis." He wiggles his fingers at her, making Gen laugh and clap.

"Oh really?"

Draco leans back to stare at me. "What? We're bonded. We've been through hell and back. We have a child together!" He shifts, pointing a finger at my neck. "I know you like brewing potions in the morning best. And, that you prefer to wear my jumpers more often than not. I know *all* the sounds you make when you cum." He turns back around, continuing to play. Then he grouses, "—Asshole never stood a chance. That's what he's so pissed about."

I drop my gaze to my hands, rubbing my fingers together in my lap. "I don't know. Today was hard, maybe it's best if everyone just moves on. Maybe we're too damaged to be friends anymore."

Genesis yawns and then toddles to me, placing her head on my shoulder. Following her cue, I pull her into my arms and stand. Draco joins me, and we take her to bed.

I brood while we put her down, but Draco squeezes my hand as he walks me back upstairs afterwards.

"You'll find your rhythm again. Everything will be fine." He pushes open our bedroom door. "And I'll stop gloating. I promise." He offers a sly smile.

I slap his stomach, teasing, "Good! Grow up!"

"Sure thing, 'Mionie," he purrs into my neck before making me squeal as he hoists me into his arms and tosses me on the bed.

September 19, 2005

"SURPRISE!"

I nearly jump out of my skin as I walk into the atrium of the Manor.

The hall is packed with people. The entire Order is here, plus several folks I've met over the past few months. Narcissa smiles from the back. Millie and the other elves are standing in the front near the door, and several of the witches we saved are here as well. I made sure to reach out to them after things settled down. But, the pair that cause my heart to warm with joy are standing to the side.

My mum and dad.

After I told Draco what Harry mentioned about them living in Australia, he kissed my cheek and said, "I'll have them home in a week." Then he headed to his office.

True to his word, once Draco knew where to look, he had no problem seeking them out. It took a month for them to regain their memories and even longer to catch up on everything that happened, but since they arrived back in London, things have been great. At first I was nervous restoring their memories wouldn't be possible. But, then I breathed a sigh of relief when we realized my younger self only used a Memory charm. She didn't Obliviate them.

"You knew what you were doing," Draco praised, kissing me that day and rubbing the tension out of my shoulders.

I begged him to move my parents into the Manor until they were able to set up a new practice, and he was quick to agree.

"You know they never need to work again, right? We can support them. Hell, let me buy them a house as a welcome home gift," he said when I asked him about it. But I had already offered, and they were horrified. They wanted to earn their way. I was pleased that they agreed to stay for a bit.

Over the next few months, we got to know one another again. We spent long nights in the library chatting as they told me all the stories they could remember about my childhood. As Muggles, the stories were all I had access to, but that was okay.

Everyone cheers as I close the door behind me and yell out, "Thank you, I'm —," I hike Gen higher up on my hip. "I'm so honored!"

As the crowd begins to mill around and network once again, Draco walks over to scoop Gen from me.

"I nearly dropped her! What did you do? Sneak them all in by Floo while we were playing outside?"

Draco raises our daughter into the air and then touches their foreheads together, trilling, "Yes, I did, didn't I, Sis!" She breaks into a peal of laughter in response. He kisses her cheek and then turns back to me. His voice drops several octaves as he orders, "Go mingle," and then he kisses me, too. "Happy birthday, Hermione."

The party is wonderful. It's one of many acts that Draco has organized in the atrium to systematically rewire our associations with this space.

I bop around, chatting with the party guests and enjoying myself as I grab a glass of elf-made wine and a plate of Hors d'oeuvre — spoons of shrimp crudo are passed around by hired wait staff as well as plump figs wrapped in prosciutto. I chat with Ginny and Harry, who have become good friends to have over at any time. They're getting married in the Spring, and I'm set to be a bridesmaid. I also stop to share a few jabs with the twins who have definitely taken to lightening my days since I met them. Gen and I love visiting them in their shop on sunny afternoons.

Harry was right. Once he met up with a new girlfriend at the Leaky Cauldron one night, Ron came around. And even though we aren't the best of friends, we're friendly. I wave at him, standing in the back by the bar, and he raises his glass to me, nodding. His smile doesn't quite meet his eyes.

The evening is perfect. I even catch the party attendants seeking out Draco, either saying a cheery hello or patting him on the back and shaking his hand. It causes me to do a double-take, but maybe everyone is thanking him for the invite.

We laugh and enjoy spending time together. The party is just another celebratory event that has been raging throughout Europe since Voldemort's death. Then, when the sun goes down, folks start to leave. They come to hug me goodbye before heading into the garden to Apparate outside the gate.

Draco meets me by the door when everyone is gone, and our parents have taken Genesis to bed.

"Did you have a nice night?" he asks, pushing the door shut over my head and then picking up my hand and kissing the inside of my wrist. It's a promise of things to come.

"Yes, and when did you get so close with all my mates?" I tease. "You looked positively, joyous. I never saw one arrogant smirk or scowl all night."

"Watch it, love." Draco tilts my head back and captures my gaze with a fire burning in his silver eyes. "You'll want to be nice to me." Then he kisses me so passionately it makes my toes curl.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?" I ask, completely out of breath already.

He grabs my hand and walks me to my office. When Draco first showed me this room after we moved back to the Manor, my jaw dropped to the floor. It was the most beautiful space I'd ever seen. I couldn't believe how thoughtful a gift it was, and inspecting all the books, trinkets, art, and more helped me to feel closer to my younger self.

Pushing the door open, he says, "Because I haven't given you your gift yet."

By this point, I am ready to lock the door and spend all night enjoying whatever gift Draco has because he sounds like it's going to be good. My stomach turns to butterflies in anticipation. However, once I collect myself, I see him pick up a box from my desk and hand it to me.

It's big—probably thirty centimeters square—and when he hands it over, it clinks as glass rattles around inside. The box is made of heavy, dark wood with a lid and hinges. Its carved artistry is exquisite.

"This is for you, love."

I smile at Draco as he leans against my desk and crosses his arms and legs. Then, I undo the latch and peer inside. What I find makes my heart lodge in my throat. I look at him, hoping that I know what the little glass phials represent.

He stands and meets me in the center of the room, then holds my hand around the box and pulls one out.

"I'm close with your mates, because I've spent the past few months with them."

I gawk at him in wonder but don't say anything as I wait for him to explain.

"I visited all those who you were close with before." Then he shrugs, adding, "Except Weasley, but he sent his over as well when Potter made him." Kissing me he continues, "I appealed to them one by one. We had nice conversations, and I was offered plenty of tea or beer as we chatted." He places the phial back in the box, then takes it from me and sets it down on the desk near our Pensieve. Grabbing both of my hands in his and leaning against the desk again, he says, "In the end, they all agreed."

Another ruddy tear runs down my chin, and Draco stops it with his thumb. I feel like I've been crying for years. But this time, it's for something really, really good.

Placing his hand on the box, he says, "Inside are all the memories that they could recall of their interactions with you. I of course also added mine and the ones you left behind."

I pull in a tight breath.

"You should be able to piece together everything you missed now." He rubs his thumb over my knuckles. "Or at least, most of it."

I'm so overcome with love for him that I can hardly speak. "You collected my memories?" I finally laugh through my raining tears.

"Yeah, love. I did."

Draco kisses me again, and I thank the gods for bringing us together, no matter how tricky and complicated our love story was. Not only did we spend hours on end going over the memories that I missed when Draco and I lived together over the past six years, but now I have everything from before the battle, too. I finally have it all.

I throw myself into his arms and kiss him back, trying my best to show him how much I appreciate the gift, which causes my husband to growl with desire.

"I love you," I say.

"Come on," Draco orders, "You can start watching these tomorrow.

This is it. This is everything I ever dreamed of and hoped for. Now, I'll finally know everything.

Thank the gods.

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December 2006

Draco walks into my office in search of me and screeches to a halt.

"WHAT THE FUCK!?" he roars.

He whips out his wand in a flash and summons the time turner out of my hand. Igniting it in a puff of flames and smoke, he yells, "Are you out of your *goddamned mind!!?*"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, calm down," I hedge, meeting him at the door.

"Where did you find that!?" he snarls, cuffing my upper arm and pinning me to the wall, furious.

I lean in and peck him on the nose.

"In the warded safe under the floorboards in your office."

My sly smile elicits a dangerous rumbling in Draco's chest.

"You better not have been thinking about using that, witch!" He squeezes me a little harder and adds, "I can't believe I kept it. I was asking for this kind of shit!"

As he bends his neck to stare at the floor angrily, I say, "No, no, I swear. I wasn't going to. I was done with it. That was my last trip!"

"WHAT!?"

Kissing his shocked lips, I wink.

"There's a reason Gen took to me so quickly."

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