

Dawn

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Voldemort's dark magic goes wrong leaving the Hogwarts students to fend for themselves.

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Hermione woke up and stretched. Parvati was already up as usual, she could hear her bare feet on the stone floor. She lay in the warm bed for a moment before building up the courage to brave the cold air outside her blanket. It was Wednesday today, she had Charms and Arithmancy in the morning. Potions with Slughorn in the afternoon. Potions was a lot more pleasant now that Snape wasn't teaching it.

And today, she was going to convince Harry that he needed to show that Half Blood Prince book to Dumbledore. She got up and dressed quickly before her body cooled too much.

She joined the trail of students wandering down to the Great Hall for breakfast. There was a slight murmur going on when she got there.

"They're late." Ron said. He was obviously referring to the food that wasn't on the tables yet.

"I'm sure it will be up any minute."

"They're never usually this late." He said looking worried. Seriously, Hermione thought, this is what he worries about.

"The teachers aren't here either." Harry pointed out and Hermione turned her gaze to the teachers' table. It was completely empty.

"Maybe they're having a meeting that is running late and they're holding the food." She said.

"Where's our food?" Someone shouted.

"Maybe we should go see if Dumbledore is in his office." Harry said.

"I'm sure its fine, Harry." Hermione said. "He would let us know if he needed us for anything." In truth, she was desperate for a bit of normalcy. She wanted them to be normal students, not the best friends of the chosen one as war was looming. Harry's suspicion had been on high alert all year.

"At least Ferret is here." Ron said. They'd figured before that if something serious was up, Malfoy would be absent, called away by his Death Eater parents. Or his potential master, although Hermione doubted her would be that stupid. Harry obviously wasn't convinced.

Malfoy was sitting at the table with his arms crossed looking highly annoyed. Well, if nothing else, at least it was annoying Malfoy.

Another twenty minutes went by and students were starting to get angry. Some of them were leaving.

"Maybe we should go check on Dumbledore." She conceded.

They got up and walked out of the Great Hall. Students were hanging around outside the Great Hall complaining about their treatment this morning.

They walked up the stairs towards Dumbledore's office. Harry said the password and the spiral staircase jumped into action. They knocked on the door, but no one answered. They stayed for a few minutes, but then left.

"Hey Katie." Harry called to Katie Bell who was walking passed.
"Have you seen Dumbledore?"

"No." She said. "There's no food. I'm starving, I didn't have dinner last night. I don't want to have to wait for lunch, but they're not serving breakfast."

Katie walked off.

"Maybe we should check the kitchen." Hermione said. She was starting to get a bad feeling.

They walked down into the belly of the castle to where the entrance to the kitchen was. They could hear that the kitchen was quiet even before they could see it.

"There's plenty of food." Ron said. "But it isn't cooked."

"Where are the elves?" She said.

"This is looking really weird." Harry said.

"I am sure there's a perfectly logical explanation." Hermione said.
"They were obviously called away somewhere. Class is starting."

"We haven't eaten." Ron said. "I can't go to class on an empty stomach."

"Looks like you'll have to." She said and walked away to Charms class.

The classroom wasn't full, but most students were sitting waiting for it to start. Some were complaining bitterly. They waited but Flintwick didn't show up.

After twenty minutes of waiting, Hermione left. She saw Harry and Ron outside the Great Hall.

"Flintwick didn't show." She said.

"Neither did Snape." Ron said. "Although that's a blessing more than anything."

"Ok, something is definitely going on."

"Listen." Harry shouted to the group of students who were hanging out outside the Great Hall. "Has anyone seen any teachers today?"

There was a murmur of no's and then a further murmur of the students talked amongst each other.

"Let's go see if McGonagall is in her office." Hermione said and they turned back towards the Gryffindor part of the castle.

They knocked on McGonagall's door but there was no answer.

"Something has happened." Hermione said. "Maybe they've all been called away."

"In the middle of the night?" Ron asked dubiously.

"Do you have any other explanations?" She asked.

"Let's see if Hagrid is home." Harry said and they walked towards the courtyard and covered bridge. They walked in silence.

Hagrid's hut was empty as well.

"They're all gone." Harry said.

"I am starving." Ron said. "I have half a mind to go down to the kitchen and cook some bacon on my own."

"You can manage without food for a morning." Hermione said.

"What if no one comes back for lunch?" He said.

"You're hardly going to starve to death." Hermione said.

"What is no one does?" Harry said after a while. "What are we going to do?"

"We'll just have to manage."

The unrest in the student population was increasing as they got back.

"Do you know what's going on, Harry?" Seamus asked.

"No." Harry said. Harry walked up the stairs a few steps. "Listen everyone. I think we need to search the castle. Each house take a quadrant and we'll search."

"Search for what?" Someone said.

"I don't know. Anything. Teachers."

"We don't do what you tell us." Crabbe said.

"Well, your lunch is depending on things getting back to normal. So if we all have to skip lunch because you won't search your part of the castle, we'll all know who to blame." Harry said.

The student body collectively turned a hard stare to the Slytherins.

"Fine." Blaise said and stalked off with the rest of the Slytherins in tow.

Harry ordered the Gryffindors to search their part of the castle. He ordered groups to search the various floors.

"I am going down to the Chamber of Secrets." Harry said. "I think we need to check everywhere."

"How are you going to get out?" Hermione said.

"I'll take a broom."

"I'll come with you." Ron said.

"Fine." Hermione said. "I'll check the Room of Requirements. We'll meet here afterwards."

They all nodded and went off in their separate directions.

The room of requirements was quiet and seemingly untouched. It was full of old stuff and there didn't seem to be anything out of order from what she could tell from the mess it already was.

She went back to the Great Hall. Students were getting anxious. Hermione still felt like she should be in class, even though logically she knew there were no teacher there to teach. It just felt wrong sitting in the Great Hall late morning.

Harry and Ron returned about half an hour later. "Chamber's empty."

"I'm starving." Ron complained. "I'm going to the kitchen."

Ron walked off.

"Let's check Dumbledore's office." Harry said.

Hermione felt uncertain. Dumbledore's office was off limits. Although maybe not to Harry, he did have special priveleges when it came to Dumbledore.

They walked back to his office and opened the door. It wasn't locked. The room was quiet except for the whirr of his contraptions. Fawkes was pacing back and forth on his perch.

"He looks aggravated." Harry said looking at the bird.

"Do you think he knows something?"

"He can't talk even if he did."

Nothing looked out of place.

"His private chamber is over there." Harry said. He slowly walked over and knocked on the door.

"Professor?" He called, but there was no answer.

He tried a few times then opened the door slowly. "Professor?"

They slowly walked inside the room they'd never seen. There was nothing but a bed in there. The bed was messy.

"Its unmade." Hermione said.

"Maybe he keeps it that way." Harry said.

"Maybe he doesn't." Hermione said. "He is pretty ordered. Maybe whatever took him did so in the middle of the night, while he was sleeping."

Harry was looking very concerned. "Something is wrong." He said.

They walked back downstairs.

"Harry." Hannah Abbot said. "I sent an owl to my parents and they weren't home. That's not right."

They absorbed the news and wondered what the implications were.

"Go home and check." Harry finally said. "Use the floo in Dumbledore's office. Go now."

They went up the stairs again. Hannah floo'd away and they waited for her return.

She flooed back within a minute. "They're not there." She said, concern obvious on her face.

"Go back and check their beds." Harry said and Hannah complied.

She was gone two minutes. Her eyes were glassy when she came back.

"They're beds were unmade. Father's glasses were on the bedstand. He is blind without his glasses." She said, she was seconds away from crying. "Where are my parents, Harry?"

"I don't know." He said. "Mione, lets check the Ministry."

They got in the fireplace and threw the floo powder. They walked out of one of the Ministry floos into the large foyer. It was completely deserted and quiet except for the water flowing in the ridiculous fountain.

"Hello?" Harry called out and got nothing back but an echo.

"What do you think this means?" Hermione said. "Where is everyone?"

"I don't know."

"I'm going home." Hermione said.

"I'll come."

Hermione apparated home. Her house was quiet, but that wasn't unusual in the middle of a week day. She ran up to her parent's room and their beds were completely unmade too, which was not typical.

"My parents, Harry, where are they?" She yelled.

"There are no cars." Harry said.

"What?"

"There are no cars."

"It's a quiet street."

"Let's go somewhere less quiet." He said. "Piccadilly. Meet me there."

He was gone and she apparated after him. They were right in the middle of the square and there were no cars anywhere, no people.

"Something is seriously wrong." She said. "Everyone is gone. What happened?"

"Something bad." Harry said. "Let's get back. We can floo from the Ministry."

They apparated back to the Ministry, which was completely silent again, then flooed back to Dumbledore's office.

Hannah wasn't there anymore.

The students were silent in the Great Hall, when they got there.

"What's happened, Harry?" Someone said.

"I don't know, everyone is gone." He said. "Even the muggles."

There were shocked gasps and cries in the cry.

"You're lying." Michael Corner said. "I'm going home."

Harry turned to Hermione. "What are we going to do?"

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

A sense of panic seemed to engulf Hogwarts. No one wanted to believe that everyone was gone, and no one would take it on without seeing for themselves. Most older students flooded home, at least until they ran out of floo powder. Some of the younger ones did as well, others didn't know how to, especially the younger muggleborns who didn't know any way of reaching home.

The younger students were standing around in scared little groups while the older ones were more angry. Many were convinced that some elaborate practical joke was being played on them.

"I'm going home." Ron said. "I have to see. Me and Ginny are both going."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, not having any idea what to do. In truth, there was nothing they could do. And maybe someone would find someone out there.

"Maybe they've all been taken somewhere." Harry said, but the look between them told of their shared fear, that they were just gone.

"How could something like this happen?" Hermione said.

"I don't know." Harry said. "This isn't even in the realm of what I know."

"I read about villages disappearing in the middle ages, but nothing on this scale." She said. "London is gone. Who knows how much? What if it isn't just London. What if it all of Britain?"

"What if its more?" Harry said. "They didn't get sick and died, they disappeared. This must be magic. And something so big, is there a clear cut off between huge and gigantic. What if its everywhere?"

"We need a TV." Hermione said.

"I've seen one in Hogsmeade." Harry said. "We could fly down and see."

They just stood there staring at each other. Students started returning from their homes, some with very young kids in tow.

"My sister was on her own." Dean Thomas said. "My parents weren't there. She's four, she was scared out of her wits. I had to bring her."

"Of course." Harry said and Dean walked off with a small girl clinging to his neck.

"There might be other kids out there, on their own." Hermione said. "If Dean's sister was home, then maybe there are others. This means this isn't just people at Hogwarts that were spared."

"The teachers weren't spared."

"Only kids." Hermione said. "Maybe this happened to everyone who was older. Grown up."

"Most of the older kids have gone to check on their homes."

"We should tell everyone to seek out any extended family members as well." She said. "Babies. If this is an age thing, there will be babies out there on their own."

"What about the muggles?" Harry said. "If this is an age thing, there are muggle kids out there."

"There could be millions, Harry." Hermione said. "There isn't anything we can do. If we have people our age, then hopefully the muggles will too. We can't help everyone, we have to focus on our own."

"Any chance everyone would just reappear again?" Harry asked.

"There hasn't been any recorded incidents of people reappearing, then again, there hasn't been any instances of this happening on this scale before either."

"If this is magic," Harry said, "then it is dark magic. Very dark."

"I know." Hermione said. "Maybe Voldemort's out there having the world to himself. Having got rid of everyone who he deems as unworthy. Maybe only the purebloods are left."

"Hannah Abbott is a pureblood." Hermione said. "Her parents are gone. Everyone at the Ministry was gone."

"Maybe just the Death Eaters then." Harry said. "We have to find Malfoy. We have to know if we need to prepare for an attack."

"Most of the Slytherins have gone home." Hermione said. She didn't know what to think. This could be a way for Voldemort to clear his way to Harry, a bit extreme, but you couldn't be sure what Voldemort considered extreme. "We should probably get out of here if that is the case. If they are coming for you, this is where they would come."

"We can't just leave everyone." Harry said.

"If they were coming, they'd probably done it by now."

Hermione spotted Pansy Parkinson returning through the floo. The look on her face showed that she was openly scared.

"Pansy's parents are gone." Hermione said to Harry quietly.

"They weren't Death Eaters." Harry said.

"They were supporters."

"I can't believe my parents are gone, Harry." Hermione said. She felt her resolve crumbling. Sorrow was creeping in, preparing to claim her with unrelenting grief. She pushed it away. This wasn't the time to think about it. They needed their wits about them.

They watched as Ron and Ginny returned. The look on their faces was all that was needed to say there was no one at home.

"Fred and George?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head and Ginny hugged him and sobbed.

Hermione felt the need to be away from them, if she saw their grief she couldn't hold back her own.

"The kids are scared and starving." She said to Harry.

"We need lunch." He said. "No one has eaten since last night. Breakfast is still sitting in the kitchen, but there is no one to cook it."

"I don't know how to cook with magic." Hermione said.

"Me neither." Harry said. "Ginny does." He whispered, but she was too preoccupied with crying to hear them.

"I don't know if food is the top priority for anyone right now." Harry said. "Maybe we can just put out some fruit for now. I want to go check that TV in Hogsmeade. We'll fly down."

Hermione nodded. She hated flying above all else, but such qualms were not important right now.

"You go get your broom and I'll go to the kitchen and get some fruit."

Hermione walked down to the kitchen and retrieved some fruit bowls. The eerie silence in the kitchen was creepy. It only highlighted that something was seriously wrong.

After placing the bowls in the Great Hall, she met Harry outside. He climbed on his broom and Hermione hesitated for a second before following him. He shot up in the air and she held on for dear life. Harry was an excellent flyer and she knew she would be just fine as long as she didn't open her eyes.

It seemed like forever, but they finally touched down.

"It's in here." Harry said and walked into a door. They found a small TV in a corner of what was someone's living room.

Harry turned it on and they were greeted with a gardening show.

"This must be pre-programmed." Hermione said. "Surely if London disappears, they would interrupt the programming if there..."

She clicked along the channels and there were there odd show, but mostly it was just test patterns or snow.

"Try the overseas channels." She said. They kept scanning, but got nothing. No news report talking about the strange disappearance.

"This doesn't tell us what is going on." She said with exasperation. "They all channel the broadcasting through locally, they would still be there. We need a portkey to be sure. Maybe to New York."

"Well, you need someone at the Ministry to make a portkey, and they're not at work at the moment."

They stood there staring. They were stuck.

"We can call." Hermione said. "I'm going home to call overseas, see if anyone picks up."

"I'll go back to the castle." Harry said. "Floo from the Ministry, grab some powder while you're at it. We are out."

Hermione apparated home again and was greeted by a silent house. She made her way to the phone and picked up. She was welcomed by the soothing sound of a dial tone. She just needed a number to call. She didn't know anyone on that side of the world, she started looking around and ended up in the manuals drawer. She found an American number for Toshiba and started dialling. She got an answer machine saying there was no customer service agents available to take her call at the moment.

She kept trying, seeking out foreign sounding numbers from the pile of electronic manuals her dad insisted on keeping. She got no one.

It was harder and harder to keep her despair away with each message or unconnected ring. She finally tried calling emergency services and reached a message to try her local police station. She had not known that was the fall back option for the emergency service.

Finally she stopped and started to cry. Once she started, she couldn't stop. She cried until she had no tears left. She head was aching with strain and dehydration. She went into the kitchen and drank some water. She could see a fire out of the kitchen window. It was some ways away, but something was not liking the neglect.

She felt bad for leaving Harry to take care of things for so long. It was getting dark outside and she had been crying for probably six hours. She had to go back, Harry needed her.

She picked up her wand and apparated to the Ministry. Again, eerie silence. She picked up a plastic bag from a garbage bin and started pouring some of the floo powder from the foyer into it. Finally she tied a knot in it and flooed back to Hogwarts.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Hermione woke up in her bed like any other day. It took her a few seconds to realise that it was not a normal day, something was seriously wrong. She hoped that it had been a bad dream, but someone crying in the dorm was a pretty sure sign that it wasn't.

She had to get up, they had to prepare breakfast. There was still food downstairs, but it wouldn't last all that long. They didn't even know how many people were in the castle, some of the students had gone, others had brought back younger kids.

Ginny had taught her the basics last night when they prepared a stew for dinner. They were alarmed by how little food was kept in the kitchen, which had turned out to be the biggest problem they are had to face.

Neville, with his interest in herbology, knew more than anyone about the crops grown for Hogwarts. Hermione had never seen the fields, but apparently they were at the outskirts of the castle. They were tended by elves, but no one was tending them now.

They had agreed that Neville should go out and survey the fields so they knew what they had. In the mean time, they carried some bread, milk and cereal upstairs for breakfast.

Students served themselves by whatever means they had.

"We're expected to eat this mush?" She heard someone say, she looked up to see Draco Malfoy looking down his nose at her. So he was back, she thought.

"Yes."

"They have better stuff in the kitchen." He challenged.

"We need to conserve it." She said.

He looked at her through narrowed eyes for a second. "Where are the bowls?"

Hermione shrugged. "You are going to have to be responsible for your own cutlery and things from now on."

"You must be joking."

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Hermione said. "You're just going to have to accept that you're on your own. No servants anymore."

"Malfoy." She heard Harry behind her in sharp tones. "Where are your parents?"

Malfoy straightened and glared at Harry. "They are gone."

"Are you sure?"

"If you haven't noticed, everyone's parents are gone." Malfoy said.

Hermione could feel the tension in Harry, it emanated from him. Harry turned and walked away. Malfoy seemed to watch him as he walked away. The hate was evident on his face.

"I am not cleaning like some common house elf." He said.

"You know what, Malfoy, I don't care." Hermione said. "I don't have time to worry about you."

"Who voted you in to be a leader here anyway?" Malfoy said.

"Well, if you can find some way of securing our food supply, Malfoy, I have more than happy to hand over the task to you."

"No thanks." He said. "Such things are the domain of servants. It seems the shoe fits."

"Just piss off, Malfoy." She said. Part of her wanted to bristle at the insult, but equally she knew, they were in too much trouble to worry about piss ants like Malfoy. He walked off and Hermione wished him good luck finding someone to serve him.

She dismissed him out of her mind. She was in full problem solving mode. Malfoy was right in that no one had voted for a leader and maybe that was something they needed to address. She decided that maybe dealing with the house prefects was the best way. It was the only sensible way to start making decisions. Neville could give them a bit of a report on what he had learnt.

She went and found Harry and told him her thoughts. He said he would take care of it. She was going to find Ginny when she was confronted by a bleeding student. A seventh year Hufflepuff girl was helping the student.

"What happened?" Hermione asked.

"A chandelier fell on her at home." The older girl said. "She just made it back. Can you help her?"

"Sure." Hermione said after a sigh. There was no one in the hospital wing to heal. Hermione wasn't a great healer, but she could heal a cut. The medical thing was another problem that Hermione hadn't even considered. They managed to walk the bleeding girl to the hospital wing. It was taking forever and Hermione felt stress at being sidelined from the millions of things she needed to do. Surely someone else could heal a cut.

It took a good 45 minutes to get the girl to stop bleeding. Hermione was left with blood all over her and had to go change. Blood was notoriously difficult to get out with a simple cleaning spell. When the hell was she going to find time to clean?

Word got to her that a prefects meeting was on in an hour. She sighed with relief. Some planning would do them a world a good. Things were just chaos at the moment. No one had any idea what

was going on. She had no idea what Harry was doing, she hadn't seen Ron all day. If he was off kissing Lavender Brown somewhere, she was going to rip him a new one.

The meeting was held in Dumbledore's office. The paintings had all realised that something was up and they were all paying attention, asking questions. Dumbledore wasn't amongst them, probably because someone had to create a painting for him to occupy. They're collective conclusion was that dark magic was indeed involved.

Not all of the prefects turned up, but most of them did, including the Slytherins, who walked in and took up occupancy in one corner of the office.

"Firstly," Harry started, "does anyone who what's happened to the adults?"

Most turned towards the Slytherins, who all ignored the questions or shook their heads.

"Has anyone seen an adult?" Harry continued and was met with silence. "Some of us think that this must be Voldemort's doing. We don't know what he is planning or what plan this is part of."

"How do you know its Voldemort?" Someone said.

"I don't." Harry said. "I just can't think of anything else. If anyone knows anything, please tell us."

Again complete silence met the room.

"In the meantime." Hermione spoke up. "We need to ensure that we stay alive. The support system has obviously gone, so we need to make sure we do what needs to be done. Food is our biggest priority, we only have enough for a few days."

"Then what?" Blaise Zabini said.

"Then we better make sure we find some more, or we'll be starving." Ginny said.

"Neville has gone out and surveyed the growing fields around Hogwarts." Hermione said pushing Neville forward to give his report. He started going through his accounts of what they have growing, which was quite vast. At least they won't be starving in the short term.

"We don't have any sources of meat." Ginny said when he was done. "We have a bit in the store downstairs, but it won't last long. We don't know where the meat comes from, but it doesn't appear to be from the grounds."

"We can hunt in the forest." One of the Ravenclaw prefects said.

"Thanks for volunteering." Ginny said and the boy flared with shock and indignity, but didn't say any more as Ginny levelled any objections with the stare she saved for her brothers when they were out of line.

"We also need someone to man the hospital." Hermione said. "Someone who is knowledgeable in healing."

"Tracey Palmer might be able to do that." Someone said. "Her father is the director of St Mungos. Was that is."

"She is thick as pig shit." Someone else said.

"Malfoy can do it." Blaise Zabini said. He received a murderous look from Malfoy. "You're trained in first aid."

There was silence in the room. It seemed many suspected that he was a Death Eater, trained in all things battle related. Zabini's proposal only confirmed that suspicion.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "Fine." He said. "But only to train someone."

"You have to pull your weight as well, Malfoy." Hermione said.

"Malfoys don't pull weight." He said in crisp tones.

"You only serve masters." Harry said.

"Fuck you, Potter." Malfoy said through gritted teeth. Malfoy stormed out of the room.

That was not the way we needed this meeting to go, Hermione thought to herself. We have to get over these petty things. She also knew what Harry would say, that they didn't need Malfoy, but she wasn't so sure. As much as she hated him, he held a lot of sway with the Slytherins and they all needed to work together if they were going to survive.

They spent the rest of the meeting talking about cooking and harvesting rosters. Neville would have to train teams on how to harvest and plant some of the fields, and everyone had to pull their weight. They also decided to rotate the responsibility for cooking. There decided that there would be one cooked meal per day, and the rest would be sandwiches or cereal. Which brought on the discussion on who would bake bread. Luckily, there was a bakers son in Hogwarts, who got volunteered to be responsible whether he liked it or not.

The new roster brought some order to the serving of meals, but the quality was atrocious or worse. Harry was still treated as the leader and questions were brought to her or Harry. Neville was run off his feet, but they managed to get some radishes and potatoes in for dinner to serve with some of their store of sausages.

At least there was water, Hermione thought as she snuck away to the prefects bathroom for a bath. She still had blood stains on her body from that morning. She dreaded to think what kind of maintenance it took to run a castle like Hogwarts. Just another problem on the pile so high she couldn't see the top of it. Her mind was aching from thinking.

After dinner, she had snuck away from the relentless avalanche of questions about bedding, clothes, cleaning, etc. The muggleborns wanted help to go home, which wasn't a good idea, but they wouldn't listen. They were out of floo powder again as people were coming and going. There was recipe for floo powder in the library somewhere, but Hermione couldn't remember which book she had seen it in. People normally just bought floo powder from reputable merchants.

Will Fabers was pestering her about how he was supposed to hunt for game if he didn't have anything to hunt with. Hermione sent him off to Hagrid's cottage. Seriously, couldn't anyone solve a problem on their own, did she need to tell everyone what to do.

Chapter 4

A/N The romance side of this story will take some time to develop.

Chapter 4

The next day flew in a blur. They had managed to get the egg supply going, and had found the farm that supplied milk. They were struggling though because Hogwarts now had more kids than it was built for. Some of the class rooms needed to be converted to dorms for the new kids coming in.

No one really knew what was going on. People were coming and going, some bringing stuff back. Floo powder was in short supply, so only those who could apparate from Hogsmeade were able to leave.

Hermione was trying to transfigure linen for all the new beds they required. Luckily they had found a whole bunch of beds in different states of repair in the Room of Requirements.

"Look who I found." Harry said. Hermione looked up and saw Professor Lupin. Her jaw dropped as she saw the first adult she had seen in a while. She ran up and hugged him.

"It is so good to see you." She said. "How is it that you...survived?"

"I don't know." Lupin said. "It seems like no one else has. I have checked every place I could think of. There was no one, except some muggle children. Eventually I thought about checking here and I am glad I did."

"No other adults have survived." She said.

"Perhaps I survived because I am not strictly normal." Lupin said.

"You're a werewolf." Harry said.

"Maybe that protected me from what has happened."

"Why would Voldemort disappear all the adults to leave werewolves?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe that was never his intent." Lupin said. "I have checked the Death Eaters' houses and they are just as deserted as the others, without any sign that they had prepared for this. The Dark Arts really is more of an art than a science. I think it is a distinct possibility that this is the result for something going seriously wrong."

Lupin started asking questions about what they had been doing and they filled him in. It was nice to have a grown up around, it felt a bit safer, which was unrealistic, but it still felt a bit better.

Lunch consisted of cheese and cucumber sandwiches. Some made it clear that they were not entirely happy with their new lunch rations, but there was nothing they could do about that. Will and his cronies were trying to bring in some game from the forbidden forest, but it certainly wasn't enough to feed the number of kids which were now over 400. A few of which weren't even on solids yet.

She watched as the kids were squeezed into the tables in the Great Hall. The only table that was not full to capacity was the Slytherins'. She'd just noticed that. She surveyed the Slytherin table and noted that there were much fewer younger kids at the Slytherin table.

She marched over to Malfoy and grabbed him by the arm.

"Don't touch me, Granger." He said. "Were you raised without any manners at all? One does not yank someone around when they are eating. It is distinctly considered low brow."

"Shut up, Ferret." She said. "Where are your kids?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where are the Slytherin kids?" She demanded again, too angry to even get bothered by his comments. "Everyone else went out and searched for younger members of our collective family. But you lot can't seem to be bothered, you've just left younger kids to take care of themselves. How dare you comment on my manners when you can't even be bothered to show the slightest care for the fundamental well being of your own. What kind of monsters are you? How can you live with yourself?"

He watched her through narrowed eyes. She had never really had a one on one conversation with him before. Usually it was just passing sniped with him looking down his nose at her. He certainly was looking down his nose at her right now like he was regarding a stinky pile of garbage in his way.

"For your information, we have searched every Slytherin residence." He said sharply.

"So where are your children?" She said. "There are clearly less children than in any other house."

"We don't breed like rabbits."

They stared at each other for a few seconds. She really didn't like him. She knew that there were lots of girls who thought he was practically an adonis, but she was not one of them. Sure he was good looking, but the awful personality ruined it pretty thoroughly.

"So this is all the children?" She asked.

He nodded sharply and walked away without saying anything more.

"Prat." She said under her breath. She didn't know if he was lying about them searching every house, but if it was true, there was a marked difference in the number within the younger generation of Slytherins compared to other houses. She knew that few of them had siblings, a preference that now meant they were vastly

outnumbered, which was not entirely a bad thing, but bad planning for this eventuality, which probably no one would ever expect.

She dismissed the unpleasant topic out of her mind. The Slytherins were always unpleasant in whatever capacity one came across them.

There was a person standing in her peripheral vision, which she knew was going to unload some problem on her as soon as she made eye contact. She was taking a few seconds to avoid it, but the person was waiting patiently. She had to return to the circus.

She saw Harry sitting with a cup of tea out in the snow in the courtyard. She stumbled across him by accident.

"It's freezing out here." She said to him.

"Just needed a moment to myself."

"Where is Lupin?" She asked.

"He had taken his old room." Harry said. "Some Ravenclaw student was in there, so we had to clear the squatter out."

"Someone was in there?"

"Some are starting to claim spaces within the Castle." Harry said.

"Some of the Hufflepuff girls have taken over Trelawney's classroom. Set up beds and everything."

"Should that be allowed?" Hermione said.

"I'm not sure there is anything we can do about it." Harry said. "And I am not sure we should. It's pretty clear that the old rules are out."

"What about classes?" Hermione said.

"The teachers are gone, Mione."

"I know, but we still need to finish out education."

"Why? Its not like it's going to make a difference. There's no one to care."

"We still need knowledge."

"Maybe some of the knowledge we are better off without."

"What are you saying?" Hermione asked.

"I am just saying that we are the future now and we can determine the future, maybe it would be better to undo some of the mistakes in the past."

"That's a dangerous road, Harry." Hermione said. "We can't just ignore the past."

"Why not?" Harry said. "We can just wipe some things clear."

"I don't think that is right."

"How about the word 'Mudblood'." Harry said. "Are we any better off as a society because of that word."

"No." Hermione said. "But there are enough people who know it for it to survive. And I'm pretty sure if we managed to wipe it out, it would just get replaced by something else meaning roughly the same thing."

"Change is possible, Mione."

"I'm just not sure censorship is the way to go."

"We can rewrite everything, we can make a better world." Harry said and got up, wiping the snow off his robes. "Think about it."

Hermione was left with an uncomfortable feeling. She definitely felt the appeal of what Harry was saying, but she wasn't sure it was the

right thing to do.

She didn't want to think about it, she just wanted things to go back to normal and the fact that it never would was a depressing thought. Her entire future was gone. She was supposed to get an entry level job at the Ministry, find a good mentor and just get on with her life. That whole life was now gone. There was no Ministry, there was no mentor, there was no land lords to rent apartments from. There was no one to make clothes, or to sell them. There was no one to make ice-cream and lollies and movies. There was no one there to give her a drivers licence, or petrol to drive a car.

It was all gone and all they had left were the people within the castle, and some of them she couldn't stand. She really avoided admitting to herself that quite a lot of them she couldn't stand. She typically focused on Malfoy and his cronies as being the wellspring of her dislike, but there were several more, the vacant girls who's main concern was how their hair looked, or even all those purebloods who were clueless about the world at large. She never voiced that belief, but it was true, she respected people less for not knowing how the wider world worked.

She only had one year left here, then she would go find likeminded people to surround herself with, but now, this was it. There were your people forever. Maybe the muggle world would recover, but she feared that it would be chaos out there.

Irrespective, she didn't think it was possible to wipe the beliefs of Malfoy and his ilk out of this world. There were a quarter of the world, more really as there were several Rawenclaws and the odd Hufflepuffs who sympathised with their views. She wasn't sure what Harry was thinking, but even an event of this magnitude was probably not enough to wipe their prejudice away.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Hermione was counting stocks when someone came to her.

"Sharon Jamieson's just come back through the floo network, she has been injured and taken to the hospital wing. She looks a fright."

Hermione groaned. This is not what she needed today. And Sharon being one of the older muggleborns meant that Hermione was uncomfortable leaving her to Malfoy's tender mercies. He might even refuse to help her or at least do a half arsed job of it. Hermione wouldn't put it past him.

There was an unwritten code that the muggleborns stuck together at Hogwarts. There weren't that many of them and there seemed to be silent consensus that they owed it to each other to stick up for one another. It didn't always extend to Hermione due to her friendship with the Boy Who Lived. Standing up to Voldemort was a little above and beyond the requirements of the muggleborn code.

Hermione marched over to the hospital wing, where Sharon was the only occupant. Malfoy was telling her to lay still.

Sharon really did look awful.

"What happened?" Hermione said.

"Well I got dragged out of bed because for some reason it was decided that I deal with people who are too stupid to look after themselves." Malfoy said with distaste.

"Its eleven o'clock in the morning, what were you doing in bed?" Hermione said and Malfoy raised an eyebrow at her. "And I wasn't talking to you anyway. Sharon, what happened?"

"I was at home, going through some stuff. These people broke into my house. They beat me up and took stuff."

"You are classified as a witch." Malfoy said. "Ever thought of defending yourself?"

"They caught me off guard." She said. "I didn't have my wand with me."

"Really? Haven't you learned to always have a wand with you? No matter where." Malfoy said.

"I was in my house."

"Not all of us grew up needing our wands around our families." Hermione said.

Malfoy gave her a murderous look.

"They just didn't care." Sharon started crying. "I think they were looking for drugs. Why would they come to my house? We don't have drugs. They took my food. Its getting really bad on the street, but I thought I was safe in my house. They just left me there, they didn't care."

"I can teach you how to ward it properly." Hermione said and Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"I'm not going back." Sharon said. "I just wanted..."

Sharon seemed to shut down and Hermione stepped away. She felt sorry for the girl. This was a horrible situation.

It did make Hermione worried about what was going on in the muggle world. It seemed like it was total chaos. She tried desperately not to think about it. There wasn't anything she could do about it. It was too big a problem and she would only destroy herself thinking about it. She hated triage, but it was necessary. At least intellectually, that was understandable.

"Her bones are fixed. She'll sleep now." Draco stated matter of factly.

Hermione nodded. Somehow she wasn't worried about Malfoy anymore. Malfoy wouldn't be kind, but he wasn't mean to the girl either.

She decided to go see Ginny. Ginny had taken on responsibility for the kitchen roster and she was a hard task master. As much as Hermione hated realising it, she suspected that Harry thought that was uber hot.

Hermione was exhausted by the time the prefects meeting came around. They met in Dumbledore's office, which seemed to be the place for anything official. There was tension in the air, she could feel it the second she walked in the door.

She looked at Harry and he was in a bad mood. She could tell by his stance. Something was going on and she didn't know what.

Ginny started the meeting by talking about the kitchen roster. Clearly no one's favourite subject.

"I'm not friggin cooking." Blaise Zabini said with contempt. "Make the younger students do it."

"Everyone needs to carry their weight." Ginny said.

"Not by cooking." He said. "Besides, that's women's work."

Hermione could see Ginny turning red with anger and embarrassment. Hermione guessed that it struck a chord with Ginny because, it was her family's expectation of her.

"I'm not putting up with your bigoted crap." Ginny said sharply. "You do work like everyone else."

"Now, now." Lupin stepped in. "We're kind of stuck in a situation where the old ways of thinking of things aren't going to serve us anymore. We all need to do our part if we are going to thrive."

"Not by cooking we're not." Blaise said and the other Slytherin's agreed with him. "What about Malfoy? He gets the responsibility of running the hospital, do you expect him to cook as well?"

"Yes." Ginny said with her arms crossed.

"That's not happening, sweetheart." Blaise said.

"Don't call me sweetheart, you creep." Ginny said. Harry was tensing up.

"Can we all calm down." Lupin said.

"I've had enough." Malfoy said and left. The other Slytherin's walked out behind him.

"That's not fair." Ginny whined. "They can't just not do their part. We're not here to serve them. I am not cooking for them if they are going to act like that."

"Then we won't." Harry said.

"We can't allow for fractures." Hermione said. "We have to stick together, if we start factioning off, then things are going to go badly."

"Hermione is right." Lupin said. "We need to stick together."

"I'm not sure everyone is better off co-operating with the Slytherins." Harry said. "Let them take care of themselves if they're not prepared to do their bit, they can have their part of the castle and be responsible for their own keep."

"That's not going to work, Harry." Hermione said. "We have communal sources of food."

"So let them have their share, no more, no less. Anything over and above their share, they can sort themselves."

Ginny made a sign to leave and they walked out. The other students who were standing around watching the confrontation followed suit after a few moments of awkward silence.

Hermione groaned internally. She had a list of things to discuss and get decisions on. Now it would be another week and she couldn't wait a week. She turned to Lupin who was sitting in Dumbledore's chair. He looked worn, depressed.

"We need potions ingredients for the cleaning potions." Hermione said. That was the first thing on her list of points covered exciting topics like linen, furniture repair, pest removal etc. Not to mention the thousand spells that kept the castle running, they needed maintenance. Some of the spells were starting to fail.

"You are right." Lupin said with a sigh. "We cannot go our separate ways. We need to stick together. Harry and Ginny are too hot headed to be diplomatic. Ron is even worse. You have to do it."

Hermione cringed. "I have enough to do."

"This is important, Hermione." Lupin said. "We cannot stop communicating. We need to be a cohesive group. You have to do the negotiation between the parties. Sooth feathers and so forth. It is a necessity."

"I am running ragged trying to keep the castle working." Hermione said.

"Well, you need to learn to delegate those duties." Lupin said. "I believe Mr. Zabini had a point. We need for some people to specialise. And we need you to do the difficult and painful job of negotiating outcomes. No one will thank you for it, but I suspect these meeting will turn into regular slugfests where certain factions will continually butt heads. This method is not going to achieve what we need."

"We need a leader." Lupin continued. "And as much as I love Harry, he does have some pig headedness in dealing with people different from him."

"You're our leader." Hermione said. "You are older."

"I don't have the energy." Lupin said. "Besides, I need to turn this into a school again. These children need to learn, we will be lost if we lose the ability to be what we are. It is probably the most important task we face. I can't do everything, so I will focus on this."

She agreed with what he said about needing to start classes again, but it wasn't in her nature to ignore something that needed doing, so she couldn't quite understand why he wouldn't lend himself to help with co-operation between the houses. But she got the distinct impression that the conversation was over.

She turned to leave.

"Oh, and I need you to teach the Arithmancy classes." He said before retreating into the back.

"But the maintenance..." Hermione started.

"Find someone else to do that, Hermione." He said.

"I wish there was someone else." She said under her breath. "But there isn't."

Hermione was overwhelmed by the workload in front of her, and now she had lesson plans to prepare. She was going to have to stay up another hour each night.

There was a discussion outside the Great Hall. Harry, Ron and some of the Ravenclaws were standing around in a tight circle. Hermione groaned, she knew that the tight little circle and the hushed whispering meant something bad. She closed her eyes for a second. Another problem to deal with.

She made her way to the circle.

"What's up?" Hermione asked.

"One of Will's hunters has gone missing." Harry said.

"What do you mean missing?" Hermione said. "Got lost?"

"We've searched all over." One of the hunters said. "Unless he has gone deep into the forest, where none of us go, he's gone ... missing."

"Maybe the spiders took him." Ron said. He was white as a ghost.

"There are lots of bad things that can happen to you in the forest." Harry said.

"We would have found him if something had hurt or killed him." Will said.

"Unless he was eaten." Ron said.

"If he is lost, he would have wandered out by now." Will said.

"Maybe he has deserted." Someone said.

"Search the forest again first thing in the morning." Harry said.

"He wouldn't survive the night if he is out there." Hermione said.

"He'd freeze to death."

"We can't go out there at night." Harry said. "It isn't safe."

Hermione wanted to say something, but couldn't find any way of saying it. Harry was right, but it was hard to accept. He was good at making difficult decisions and she knew she wasn't. She could not make a decision to just leave someone in the forest overnight because it was safer for the communal good to do so. It hurt her to the bone to accept such a decision, to risk one in order not to risk

more. It was hard enough to accept triage with a bunch of nameless, faceless people out there in the muggle world, but with someone they've known for year. Well it took a special kind of person to make such a decision. Sometimes she wondered about Harry, wondered what this war had turned him into.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

"The Slytherins are leaving." Parvati said as she walked into the Gryffindor common room where Hermione has put her feet up after an awful day.

"What?" She said. "What do you mean leaving?"

"They're packing." Parvati said. "They're leaving."

"Wha...?" Hermione repeated. She forced her weary bones off the couch.

Parvati shrugged.

Hermione wanted desperately to plop down on the couch again, but Lupin's words were echoing in her head. He would be disappointed in her if she let the Slytherins desert them.

With a groan she headed towards the common room portal. She'd never been down to the Slytherin common room, she wasn't entirely sure of the way, but she found it and banged on the door.

"What do you want?" A fourth year Slytherin boy said.

"Get me Malfoy." She ordered.

The boy seemed to consider slamming the door in her face, but the narrowed eyes she gave him made him relent.

"Wait here." He said brusquely.

She waited at the portal, looking inside the Slytherin common room. It was dark and gloomy. The lake ceiling was completely black. How could they stand living here? No wonder they wanted to leave.

Malfoy appeared at the portal.

"What do you want?" He said with enthusiasm equalling the little fourth year miscreant she'd just spoken to.

"I hear the Slytherins are packing." She said looking the tall blond Slytherin in the eye. She couldn't remember ever purposefully seeking him out before. Except maybe to make sure he wasn't killing Sharon Jamieson.

"So?" He said looking like he was being put out by having to talk to her.

"You're leaving?" She said.

"Hence the packing. Are you going to miss me?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"If that's all, I'm rather busy." He said and started to close the portal. Hermione put her hand on it to stop him from closing it and he narrowed his eyes in annoyance.

"Where are you going?" She said and stepped through the door.

"How is that possibly any of your business?" He said. "Now if you don't mind, I have things to do. Chatting with you has never qualified as something valid to do, so go."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Where are you going?" Hermione said. "Is everyone going? It affects everyone if a quarter of us decide to up and leave."

"Tons of people have left Hogwarts already." He said. "You're too busy running the show to see that most of us aren't that excited

about it. Not everyone wants to stand around and take orders from you like stupid little lap dogs."

"So you're leaving because you object to me trying to organise things?"

"Don't overestimate your importance." He said with an arrogant sneer.

"So why are you leaving?"

"Because there is no reason to be here." He said and walked back to what must have been his room. Hermione followed him.

She felt a little funny walking into Malfoy's room. Realising there was more to him than the two dimensional character that annoyed them in class or the supposed evil git who was always immaculately dressed and coiffed, like he was stored in a box when he was out of sight.

He shared a room with Blaise Zabini, who proceeded to give Draco a look like 'What the fuck' when she walked into the room. He was packing as well.

"Where are you going?" She demanded.

"To my manor." Malfoy finally said. "It has enough room for most of us. Some will stay in their own houses. Some of us to have lives outside of Hogwarts."

"How will you survive?" Hermione said.

They both stopped and gave her an incredulous look.

"How will you get food?" She clarified.

"My family concerns have plenty of food production, and much more arable land. We have always had farms. Nott's family too. And there's plenty of land to be had." Malfoy said.

"But we need to stick together." Hermione said.

"No we don't." Blaise said.

"We have to work as a group." Hermione continued. "And what about your education?"

"Are you serious?" Draco said with a mocking face. "I'm sorry to inform you, but there isn't going to be any NEWTS. No one for you to show off for anymore. No one who cares anyway."

Hermione ignored him. This wasn't about her, there were more important things. "Our society is tiny now. We have to stick together, it won't do that you go off and do your own thing."

"Are you going to stop us?" He said with incredulity.

"So what you're just going to go off and do your own thing?" She continued. "How are we supposed to rebuild a society if you go off and segregate yourself?"

"We have always been trying to segregate ourselves. I was pretty sure you of all people would have realised that by now."

"So you're leaving to get rid of muggleborns."

"Again, you give yourself way too much credit." He said. "But we will live like we want to live, like we should live and staying at school with the boy wonder does not form any part of that."

"What about what's best for the wizarding world?"

"There is no threat to the wizarding world. This is a little blip in time that will be recorded as a footnote in the history books. That's all. Things will be exactly like they were. Nothing will change."

"What if you're wrong?" Hermione said. "If we go our separate ways at this point, who is to say that the separation isn't permanent."

"You're hysterical." Blaise said.

"We don't even know what happened." Hermione said. "We don't know what's taken all the adults away, we don't know if its going to happen again."

Malfoy was putting some things in his trunk.

"You know what's happened, don't you?" She said.

"I don't." He said and looked at her. "But I have some suspicions. Voldemort always had an ambition to rid the world of muggles, and I think he tried, but something went wrong. Obviously."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Say what? That I had suspicions? Everyone has suspicions."

She stared at him for a while. She wasn't getting anywhere.

"I think you should stay." She said. Then after a moment of internal kicking herself, she said. "We need you."

"Granger, are you begging?" He said with amusement.

"No." She stated flatly. "You run the hospital wing."

"Find someone else." He said.

"What about your education?" She asked.

"I think I'll manage." He said. "I do have the most extensive private library in the land."

"Lupin is starting classes." She said. "What about the younger Slytherins?"

"I guess they can go if they want."

"They won't if you give them a choice." She said.

"Not my problem." He said.

"How can you say that?" She said. "Don't you take any responsibility for protecting this society?"

"I protect my family and our interests, that has always been our one and only purpose."

"Well, is it in your interest that the purebloods can't do a simple charm? Because that is what you're going to get if your young aren't educated."

"I think we can manage to educate our own." Blaise said. "And a proper education at that."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Again. None of your business." Malfoy said with annoyance. "Now, I've had enough of your stupid questions. Get out, or I'll throw you out."

Blaise laughed at his threat.

"You're so immature." Hermione said. "You're hurting all of our chances of making it by doing this."

"Really? Because it feels like I'm getting rid of a major pain in the arse." He said. "It's the undeniable upside of this whole thing."

Hermione huffed and stormed out of the room. It was obvious they weren't going to listen to her. Not that she really expected them to, but unfortunately it seemed like Professor Lupin was so deluded to think she could make them.

It was really late and now that the adrenalin was retreating, Hermione could barely keep her eyes open. There were kids all over the school. Gone were the days when students were in their houses

by curfew and the halls of Hogwarts were quiet. She even walked past a duel going on between two Hufflepuffs. If she wasn't so tired she would have done something about it.

She found Harry sitting with Ginny in the common room.

"The Slytherins are leaving." She said.

"I heard."

"And you're not going to do anything about it?"

"Like what?" Harry said. "And what's to say it isn't a good thing. This place will be awesome without them. They've never fitted in."

"That's not the point Harry. This isn't a popularity contest, this is about the future, a future where there isn't a major faction of society who is segregated."

"Aren't we all better off if they were?" Ginny said. "We don't like them, they don't like us, it seems like a good solution for all around."

"We haven't got the numbers to support a society that works that way."

Harry shrugged like he didn't believe her. Hermione stomped her foot in frustration. Why the hell did Lupin have to unload all this crap on her, she had enough things to worry about? Being a diplomat between groups who wanted nothing to do with each other was not the best use of her time. And she wasn't entirely convinced it wasn't a good thing either.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

The Slytherin table was practically empty the next morning. There were only a handful of people left and to Hermione's surprise Pansy Parkinson was one of them. She was sitting with blond seventh year Slytherin girl.

Pansy looked uncomfortable and unhappy.

"Why is she still here?" Hermione asked Ginny.

"Guess she didn't want to stay at her ex's house." Ginny said. "Or she wasn't invited. Apparently they fell out a while ago."

"Oh." Hermione said. She wasn't exactly up to date on Malfoy's love life.

"Could you imagine living in your ex's house?" Ginny asked.

"Particularly if it was Malfoy. I feel sorry for her."

"A statement I never truly expected to hear you say." Hermione said.

"There have been a lot of unexpected things lately." Ginny said and Hermione nodded in agreement.

Hermione guessed there were less people to feed now, which was good. And more bedrooms now that the Slytherins had cleared out. Although there was a good chance that they would come crawling back as soon as they got hungry. She didn't think they truly understood how much effort went into feeding a crowd. And even if they managed, she was pretty sure some would come back because she doubted that whatever way they devised to support themselves, it was unlikely to be fair considering they left because they didn't want to do their fair share of work.

Hermione got absorbed in the business of running the castle. The Slytherins weren't the only ones to leave. Others left too, but in groups of two or three, who went to stay at someone's house. They tended to come back for food when they'd cleared their house stores. Even Ginny and Harry would take a few days away at Grimmauld Place. Ron wasn't happy about it, but there wasn't really anything he could do about it. He wasn't too distraught as he was mostly stuck down Lavender Brown's throat.

The boys had managed to get the quidditch competition going. Nice to know the important things in life were covered off.

Hermione was starting to feel a little put out as her work load just seemed to escalate while the others were getting on with doing things they liked. And there was no control in the library, people were taking books as they pleased and no one knew where things were. Hermione knew it was incredibly pedantic, but she just wanted some order. Plus it annoyed her beyond belief when a book she wanted wasn't there.

Neville had to take over the role of running the medical stuff after Malfoy left. He was happy to do it, but he didn't have the skills or the training that Malfoy had. He was helped by Luna, who's advice wasn't entirely useful, but the effort was appreciated.

Some kids were struggling with the adjustment to this new life. Some were not coping well, while others enjoyed the freedom.

"Hey Hermione." Harry called after her one day. "Do you know where Ernie MacMillan is?"

"No." Hermione said. "I haven't seen him. Have you checked the Hufflepuff common room?"

"He left about a week ago." Harry said. "He went home apparently. And Justin Finch Fletchley says he isn't there and can't be reached."

"Well if they leave the castle, how are we supposed to keep track of them." Hermione said.

"Well, Justin is really worried, its apparently not like Ernie to go missing." Harry said. "What if he is missing, like the boy in Will's crew."

"We don't know if he has." Hermione said. "Maybe he is visiting family, a cousin or something."

"He doesn't really have any close family according to Justin."

"Well, there is nothing I can do about it." Hermione sighed. She had too much on her plate to deal with absent people.

"Just if you see him." Harry said and he was off.

Ernie Macmillan remained a question mark. Weeks went by and no one heard from him. No one knew what to do and he was a problem that just didn't resolve itself. Along with the missing hunter.

Then there came news of another attack. Apparently Eddie Carmichael had been attacked in Diagon Alley. Hermione rushed to the hospital wing where the poor boy was screaming in agony. There were deep cuts down the front of his chest and arms.

"I don't know what to do!" Neville yelled holding a piece of cloth over one of the wounds. "I don't know how to deal with this."

Hermione rushed over to help. Eddie was bleeding profusely and he was wriggling around in a vain attempt to escape the pain.

"Give him some pain killer." Hermione said. "I'll..."

She didn't know what to do. Then it finally stuck her, "I'll get Malfoy."

She didn't know if giving him pain relief potion was a good idea, but she couldn't think of anything else to do. It seemed cruel to leave him writhing in agony, but she supposed it was better than dying due

to misplaced pain relief potion. The best thing she could do was get Malfoy.

She rushed over to the fireplace in Madam Pomfrey's office. She threw the floo powder down and spun off, but she hit something and ended up back in the hospital wing. Whatever she hit, it hurt a lot.

"Wards." Neville said. "You can't get past the wards."

Hermione resorted to sending Malfoy a patronus pleading for help. They waited for something to happen, but only Eddie's cries surrounded them. Ages seemed to pass before the fireplace flared up.

Malfoy finally stepped out of the fireplace and Hermione had never been so glad to see him.

"This better be good." He said with venom. "I am not at your beck and call."

"We have more than we can handle." Hermione said.

Eddie's screams seemed to accentuate her point. Malfoy walked over and started working. Both Hermione and Neville watched him. It was apparent that he had skills in healing. He also knew healing charms that was way beyond either of them. Slowly Malfoy started to knit Eddie's flesh back together. The crying turned to whimpers and eventually Eddie fell asleep or passed out after a string of potions.

"That should keep him." Malfoy said. "There is a chance of infection, so he will need potions to control infections. Every three hours, without fail. Now if you two morons can take it from here."

Hermione bristled at being called a moron.

"With your devotion to books, I would have thought you'd manage to sift out a healing charm or two."

"I don't have time." She said.

"And how is that my problem?" Malfoy shot back.

"I couldn't get to you through the floo." Hermione said. "I bounced back."

"We are a bit discerning in who we let in."

"This was an emergency Malfoy." Hermione said. "And it could happen again."

"Well, try to develop some healing abilities in your own group."

"What if you need us."

"Like that would ever happen."

"Eddie was attacked." Hermione said. "And we don't know why or who did it. And we now have two missing students. Something is going on. Like it or not, we might occasionally need your help. Blocking us when emergencies happen can get someone killed."

"Yes, well, we have good wards for a reason." Malfoy said. "Part of a reliable security system is to not let absolutely anyone in through your wards. I would have thought that was obvious."

"So that's it." Hermione said. "We can't get into your wards no matter what."

Malfoy looked defiant.

"What if one of the Slytherins gets injured. There still are some here. What about one of the kids that comes for classes." Hermione challenged.

"I'm not letting just anyone into my house." Malfoy said. "I won't negate its security just because you have a blubber about something."

"We need to be able to reach your people in case of an emergency." Hermione continued.

"The patronus worked fine." Malfoy said.

"This time." Hermione said. "We were lucky. If you had been asleep or in the bath, you wouldn't have seen it."

"Fine." Malfoy relented. "One of you can come through the wards. But I am not setting my house up for all of you to wander through at your leisure."

"I will do it." Hermione said. "And believe me, I have no interest in lingering."

Malfoy stared at her. "Fine." He finally said. "I will adjust the wards, but if you abuse it, I will put it right back the way it was."

"You're a total git." She said.

"Do you want me to change the wards or not?" He challenged.

Hermione was itching to tell him to shove it, but it wouldn't serve her purpose. Lupin would be disappointed in her. She was supposed to be the great negotiator after all.

"Please change the wards." She said through gritted teeth.

Draco narrowed his eyes before turning to the fireplace and flooing back where he came from.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Eddie had apparently been attacked by a group of men in Diagon Alley. He had fought them, but they had chased him far down the alley. It wasn't anyone he recognised and he wasn't sure whether they were magical. He couldn't remember seeing any wands. His injuries were cuts, so it was likely they had knives.

"If they weren't magical, how come they were in Diagon Alley?" Ron asked Harry as he stood some ways away from Eddie's bed.

"Maybe the anti-muggle charms are failing." Harry said.

"We should check them." Hermione said. "We can't let muggles run around Diagon Alley. We have to keep the secrecy."

"Does it really matter?" Ron said.

"Oh course it matters." Hermione said. "We will recover from this and things will eventually go back to normal."

"That's a bit of a stretch." Harry said.

Hermione conceded. "I still think we have to keep the secrecy. That might not be a bell that can be un-rung. I for one am not ready to completely throw caution to the wind. Granted the muggles don't have a way to communicating at the moment, but its only a matter of time. The muggle world will recover as well."

"We're hoping." Harry said. "Let's go check Diagon Alley this afternoon."

They floored to Diagon Alley in the afternoon. Someone had managed to create floo powder which was good, except some of the floo connections had stopped working, which meant that you didn't

necessarily end up where you wanted to. Fortunately the Leaky Cauldron floo was still functional.

The Leaky Cauldron was deserted, as was Diagon Alley. It had an eerie feel as some of the magic was still making shop signs move. They could hear the creak of Fred and George's joke shop down the Alley. Ron wasn't happy to be there, none of them were.

It didn't look like it was overrun by muggles. Hermione went outside into the muggle part of London, it was deserted as well. It was completely bizarre to see a silent and still London. Hermione got a creepy feeling running up her spine. She reinforced the anti-muggle charms and stepped back inside the Leaky Cauldron as quickly as she could.

Hermione felt drained when she got back to Hogwarts. Normally she was too busy to even think about what had happened, but seeing Diagon Alley made it so much more real. And now there were people attacking them. The anti-muggle charms at Diagon Alley hadn't failed, there shouldn't have been muggles in Diagon Alley, which presented questions about the group of men that attacked Eddie.

What had also become blaringly apparent was that they didn't have the skills to deal with significant injuries.

"We need Malfoy to share his skills." Lupin said to her while they were sitting in Dumbledore's office drinking tea.

"Malfoy is not a good teacher." Hermione said.

"Yes, well, our needs are more important than Malfoy temper." Lupin said.

"It would be cruel to subject Neville to Malfoy's tutelage." Hermione stated. "Perhaps I should do it. I am not a great healer, but I can learn."

"No Hermione, you need to learn to let other people take on responsibility." Lupin said. "Neville will have to learn from Malfoy. You have to get Malfoy to agree. We cannot depend on Malfoy each time there is an emergency and if this group of men are attacking wizards, then we might be presented with more injuries."

Hermione nodded, although she hated the idea of having to negotiate with Malfoy.

Hermione sent Malfoy an owl saying that she was coming to see him. She didn't get one in return, which was annoying, but it wasn't going to put her off.

She flooed over to Malfoy Manor at the time she had stated. There was no one there to meet her in the vast foyer of his manor. She had never been there before, or any of the Slytherin pureblood houses. Other than Grimmauld Place, which technically was a Slytherin home. Malfoy Manor was on an entirely different scale.

The manor was clearly old, as was much of the furniture within it, but everything looked ridiculously expensive.

"Malfoy!" She shouted as loud as she could.

"Really Granger?" She heard from inside of the room. "Were you raised with no manners at all?"

"I would have thought greeting guests when they arrive would have been cordial." She said and walked towards the door his voice was coming from.

"One does not greet intruders." He stated plainly.

"I sent an owl saying I was coming." She said.

"And the fact that it was not acknowledged typically means that the assignation is not on."

"Well, I can't wait around for you to agree to meet me." She said.
"We both know you had no intention of agreeing to a meeting." He raised an eyebrow at her from behind the desk he was sitting at.

"And somehow the other's party's consent has little meaning to you."

"I can't afford to sit around and wait until you're in the mood to grant me an audience." She said pointedly, drawing out the sarcasm in her voice. She sat down in a chair on the other side of the room. It was a dark room, dark wood and green. A very masculine room. She realised that this had been Lucius Malfoy's study. Draco's now. This is where the frankly terrifying Lucius Malfoy spent a lot of his time.

Draco snorted with annoyance and stood up from behind the desk and walked over to the set of large chairs that Hermione had partially occupied. He sat down in the other chair. He looked down his nose at her like he found her tedious. She had always derided Draco as the spoilt brat he was, but he wasn't so much a child any more. She could see hints of his father in him. She would never outright admit it, but Lucius Malfoy had scared her senseless. He was power, skill and malice, and the few times he looked at her, she felt like he saw right through to her doubt and insecurity.

Draco was beautiful, there was no doubt. She had never feared Draco. She wondered if he was capable of being someone feared like Lucius was feared. She couldn't see it.

"Would you like some tea?" He asked.

"That would be nice." Hermione said more out of curiosity than any particular desire for tea.

He got out his wand and mumbled something.

"Now." He said with a tight smile that told he was not smiling for any reason other than a barely concealed ode to politeness. "To what do I owe this delightful visit?"

"We need you to share your healing skills with Neville."

Draco stifled a laugh. "You must be joking. Why would I waste my time training an idiot?"

"Neville is not an idiot." Hermione said with anger.

"I really don't have time." Malfoy said. "I have things to take care of."

"You have to." Hermione said. "Something is attacking our people. We have to be able to heal them if it happens again. We cannot afford to lose people, Malfoy. There are so few of us, if we are going to recover, we need as many as possible. As a collective, we're not exactly the most fruitful people and too many of us are too closely related."

"Yes well, you're not really one of us, are you?" He said with malice.

"And that is the important part of this conversation?" She said incredulously. "Could you perhaps try to focus on the important parts here. Our survival is under threat and you still see past your petty prejudices? For the love of this world, could you please try to focus. I swear sometimes I wonder if there is any hope at all."

Draco looked annoyed with her admonishment.

"We need to be able to heal, or you have to commit to being there whenever we need you."

Draco had a look of distaste. He was about to say something when there was a little knock on the door.

A older teenage girl walked in with a tea tray and placed it on the small table between the chairs. She didn't look up at them and made a little bow before retreating.

"Was that..." Hermione started. "Was that a muggle?"

Draco shifted his head to the side.

"You have muggles serving you?" She asked with astonishment. Silence prevailed for a while.

"Actually, muggles serve at the house and they manage the food supply." He said.

"That's... barbaric. Immoral." She stuttered.

He raised his eyebrows again. "Service has been an institution in place since the beginning of time."

Hermione was struggling to say something, but she ended up looking like a fish out of water.

"We get service and they get protection in return." Draco says. "It serves both parties."

Hermione was still struggling with something to say. "You're taking advantage of them."

"Really, do you know what they face in the muggle world? It is complete anarchy. We provide safety, room and board. Even a warm bed if they're willing." The last sentence was said with the intention of shocking her.

Hermione got the insinuation full and well. She felt like throwing up.

"You're revolting." She said.

"Really, I would have thought in the scheme of things it's kinder than leaving them to their fate in the muggle world." He said. "Would you like me to call back the girl. She can tell you what it's like in the muggle world for a girl."

Hermione got out of the chair.

"I am sending Neville over here to learn to heal. Starting tomorrow. Adjust the wards. Unless you prefer to come to Hogwarts."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Fine." He said tightly after a while.

Hermione flooed back to Hogwarts without saying goodbye. She felt disgusted by what she'd learnt. Having elves serve was bad enough, having muggle girls serving was despicable. The idea of people having to pay for protection sat against her values. It was something you gave, not traded. Part of her knew the world worked on trade, but it wasn't something she really wanted to confront. She like to think that people did what they did because they liked it, bar keeps loved being bar keeps, bakers loved being bakers. She knew that was a bit deluded, but she didn't want to acknowledge that it may not actually be so.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Harry and Ron did not take the Slytherins' ingenuity well. In fact there were just about ready to go over there to give them a serious bollocking until they realised that Hermione was the only one who could access it. They insisted she take them all over, but she refused.

Her job as a diplomat and negotiator would be pretty much over if she let a bunch of angry Gryffindors into Malfoy Manor. She could just imagine Professor Lupin's disappointment, and also she didn't quite agree that the march over and scream at them strategy was the right way to handle things.

As the day progressed there were further disgruntlement in the castle as there were some factions, primarily within Ravenclaw, who say the use of muggle labour as a perfectly legit course.

It caused quite a rift within the castle, Gryffindors mainly totally against, while others saw the merit of it. And the rift seemed to shift into something more personal. Even when the Slytherins were gone, they were a dividing force. The idea of the idyllic existence without the Slytherins faded.

Some even decamped and joined the Slytherin enclave. Harry and co. were adamant that it would just make it better if the people with those kind of morals left.

Lupin was clearly disappointed with her when she had to report on how things were going. He reminded her strenuously that they needed to stick together, like she was the person driving them all apart.

More people left over the next few weeks. The hard labour to feed and care for the community was too much for some, which only made more work for the people who were left.

Hermione felt the tension in her bones, it settled like a persistent cough in her chest. A slight sense of uncomfortableness that wouldn't leave.

The Slytherins did send over some of their younger kids for classes, which pleased Lupin.

"There is a real danger that if we lose contact, we will never be able to recover it." Lupin said.

Surely that was absurd, Hermione thought. They were a small community, and they had joint areas in common such as Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, but then no one went there at the moment, not since the attack on Eddie.

Hermione ran past the group who were ready to head out to work in the fields. They were dressed without much care, which was understandable when they got so muddy in the fields.

Ron was going out with them, but Harry was apparently off somewhere, looking for something in Diagon Alley. The group started walking to the apparition area which was a lot closer to the school now. They had let the anti-apparition charm fail a bit as it was otherwise so far for everyone to walk. It wasn't like there were Death Eaters trying to break into the castle anymore.

Hermione was off to fix a burst pipe. Somehow no one seemed to want to do these jobs. Hermione didn't work the fields and if someone challenged her on it, she would give them the job list she had to do that day. In the end they chose the fields.

But the constant work and worry was wearing on her. It felt like everything was falling apart.

Hermione got a distress patronus from Ron halfway through the afternoon, it said he was down on the northern fields by the forest and was under attack. Hermione ran down the stairs and through the halls until she reached far away from the castle to apparate. Maybe they should remove the anti-apparition charm completely.

Hermione was disorientated when she stepped out on the field, she could hear hexes being cast and started running towards it. She started firing hexes at the figures who was attacking Ron. Ron and someone else was taking cover behind a tree, trying to hold off the group of four people who were attacking them. There was someone lying in the field as well.

One of them noticed her approach and started firing at her. She ducked down in the field being completely exposed in the field. She couldn't get to the person lying to the left of her, but she could make out that it was Katie Bell. The firing kept up and Hermione was really close to being hit. Another pop behind her told her that someone was there.

"Mione." She could hear Harry yell behind her. She kept the hexes flying and the intruders started to retreat. They obviously didn't like being equally matched in numbers. They looked like men. Before long they apparated away.

"You alright Ron?" Harry shouted as he and Neville on ran towards Katie.

"Yeah." Ron shouted back as he stepped out from behind the tree. Pansy Parkinson was crying and clinging to Ron for dear life. "They were going after the girls." He said.

"She's alive." Neville said as he crouched over Katie. "I'll take her back to the hospital wing."

"It was him." Pansy said. "Fenrir Greyback. He is the most vile creature."

"He is a werewolf, just like Lupin, so it stands to reason that he survived. I completely forgot about him. What does he want? Why was he going for them?" Harry asked. "Do you have an issue with him?"

"No!" Pansy exclaimed between sobs. "I've seen him a few times, but I don't know him."

"They were on their own when they attacked, I heard their screams and came running." Ron said. "She's pretty shook up, I'll take her to the hospital wing as well."

Ron side along apparated Pansy back to the castle, leaving Harry and Hermione to visually search the edge of the forest.

"You think they were after her?" Hermione asked Harry.

Harry shrugged. "I can't see why they were after Pansy and Katie in particular." He said. "Maybe Pansy because she's a girl and a Slytherin."

"They looked like men." Hermione said. "Grown ups."

"Maybe he is banding all the werewolves together." Harry said. "Maybe they are responsible for all the attacks."

"Why would they go around attacking people?" Hermione said.

"Because they're psycho and they can." Harry said. "One of them was not firing hexes, did you notice?"

"A muggle?"

"There are muggle werewolves." Harry said. "Lupin told me once."

"So why attack Hogwarts students?" Hermione said. "Lone students. Its not like they're attacking the school."

"They're not strong enough to take us." Harry said. "Maybe they are recruiting."

Something cold settled in her stomach. Werewolves recruiting would be a bad thing. They wizard numbers were decimated and werewolves could grow theirs by biting people and turning them into werewolves.

"I'll go get Malfoy." Hermione said.

"We don't need him." Harry said.

"Yes we do. Neville doesn't have anywhere near the skills that Malfoy does."

Hermione apparated to Malfoy Manor and shouted out for Malfoy as she got there.

"Seriously, Granger, I do have a life." Malfoy said. "A pleasant one that you keep on interrupting."

"We have an emergency."

"Maybe your incompetent lot should look after themselves. If they are stupid enough to injure themselves, maybe they should just put up with healing the natural way."

"Werewolf attack." Hermione said.

It seemed to pause Malfoy for a second.

"Fenrir." He said more like a statement.

"You knew he was running around and attacking people?"

"No, but I guessed he would turn up eventually."

"He and a group of others injured Katie Bell."

"Really?" He said. "That girl has the worst luck."

"Can you help her?"

"We can try to burn the poison out, but it's a painful and questionable process. A lot of pain for perhaps no result."

"I guess it is up to Katie."

"I do have some of the counteracting potion downstairs." He said. "I will bring it if you insist. But I reiterate, I don't want you to come running every time one of you snivelling idiots scratches a knee."

Hermione returned to Hogwarts and Malfoy followed about fifteen minutes later.

Katie wanted the potion. She would take the pain over turning into a werewolf any day.

"There is nothing else to do." Malfoy said after the wound was dressed. "I'm off. As always, I hope I will never see any of you again."

Malfoy left by the fireplace. Hermione still thought he was a complete bastard, but she was grateful that he had agreed to come. As awful as he was, he did seem to front up in an emergency.

"I will stay with her." Lupin said. "I know the effects of the potion."

Katie was obviously in pain, Harry and Hermione left. Ron had already gone with Pansy who was not ready to let him go just yet. Pansy had no injuries, just a severely shaken confidence in the world.

"Do you think they attacked Ernie?" Hermione asked and Harry nodded.

"And probably the hunter as well." Harry said. "Otherwise we would have found a trace of her."

"And they turned them." Hermione said with a shiver. "That's awful."

"Lupin seems to be taking it hard." Harry said. "We have to do something about this. We can't let Fenrir get away with this."

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Hermione found herself sitting in Malfoy's study yet again. She felt beyond uncomfortable when the muggle girl brought in the tea tray, but the girl smiled like there was nothing out of the norm. At least the girl wasn't quivering in fear like Hermione was pretty sure the Manor elves had been.

"We found an elf by the way." Malfoy said.

"Oh."

"A youth." He said and took his tea. "They breed rarely due to their long lives. This one was found in a house in Ireland."

Hermione had no idea what the Slytherins were doing in Ireland. Good to know there was a house elf, maybe there were more out there. It would be a shame if the one that was in known existence was the only one. Without doubt, the poor little thing had been put to work as soon as it was discovered.

"Fenrir and his men, beasts will never get into the Manor." Draco started. "We will reinforce some of the other residences, but Fenrir is a master at getting through wards."

Hermione absorbed what Malfoy was saying.

"Hogwarts is well defended provided the wards are kept up." He continued.

They had let some of the wards slip. Hermione knew what most of the wards were, some were listed in books. They had already recast the anti-apparition wards to where they used to be.

"We have people who are staying in their own houses." Hermione said.

"Well they better have good wards or they are going to be werewolf breakfast." Draco said in a bored tone. Hermione wondered how he could be so blasé about others misfortune. "If they haven't got the wards to keep them safe, they shouldn't be there."

"There has been a search party in Diagon Alley looking for them." Hermione said.

"You mean Potter and his fans."

Hermione hated it when Malfoy degraded Harry. "Someone needs to deal with them."

"As there is always a volunteer, I suppose the rest of us will just leave him to it."

"You're not going to do anything?"

"What would you like me to do, leading raiding party in Diagon Alley?"

"I thought that was the kind of lifestyle you were all signed up for." Hermione said sharply and Malfoy narrowed his eyes at her.

"Fenrir isn't stupid." Malfoy said. "They're wasting their time."

"Well, what are we supposed to do?" Hermione said with exacerbatation. "We have to do something. Its not safe for our people to walk out in the open. That is not tolerable."

"Traipsing through Diagon Alley like a herd of elephants is probably not going to do it." Malfoy said. "He's obviously after students, so he will come to you."

"Well that is helpful." Hermione said. "He's after your people too."

"They haven't come and attacked here." Malfoy said. "Then again we know how to defend ourselves."

"We need to work together." Hermione said.

"Working together is not really your forte, your more 'its our way or no way'." Malfoy said. "I have things to do and you have taken too much of my time."

"Really, because it seems that others do all the actual work."

"Sour grapes?"

"You're despicable."

"Then please stop coming around." He said and walked towards the door. He still dressed exactly the same as he used to, had not let his standards for dress or presentation slip on bit. Hermione felt a bit frumpy in her sweatshirt and jeans.

"What is she doing here?" Hermione heard from the door where Blaise was standing. "Is she in love with you?"

"What? No!" Hermione stated strongly with a huff.

Malfoy just shrugged which made her even more angry.

"Voldemort will have to be tap dancing down Diagon Alley before I fall in love with Malfoy." Hermione said.

"Voldemort's dead."

"Exactly." She said and pushed past Blaise. Oh, they gave her the creeps, she thought as she floo'd back to Hogwarts.

Harry's raiding parties on Diagon Alley were less than fruitful. He kept on trying every day for a couple of months. They did chase someone one day, but they got away.

"What are you going to do if you catch someone, Harry?" Hermione asked one evening.

Harry shrugged. "We can lock them up, I guess, but that would take a lot of resources to manage, not to mention to feed them."

"So what are you saying?"

"I've talked about it with Lupin." Harry said.

"And?"

"And we can't have werewolves running around building numbers." Harry said. "Fenrir is ambitious and wants to set up a world where he and his kind rules."

Hermione rubbed the side of her face, why couldn't things just be fine and dandy. Why did someone always have to feel compelled to take over the world?

"What about the people he has turned? What about Ernie?"

Harry shrugged.

"Not everyone is evil." Hermione said. "Lupin isn't."

"I guess we will just have to cross that bridge when we get to it."

The war like feeling was all over the castle. Harry and Ron had managed to get their hands on some rifles in a police safe that the muggles hadn't been able to crack, and everything silver was being melted down to make bullets.

The attention was so intent that the food supply began to suffer. The students worked in the fields now with armed guards.

"That fucking bastard!" Harry yelled at breakfast one day. "He won't help. Malfoy, he won't help with Fenrir. Oh, and he calls himself Lord Malfoy, by the way."

Harry marched out of the Great Hall and Hermione deserted her porridge to follow him.

"He just thinks that you're wasting your time looking for him." Hermione said when she caught up with Harry.

"Or he is just leaving his buddy Fenrir to it."

"No Harry." Hermione said.

"Face it, Mione." Harry said. "Malfoy and Fenrir were practically bosom buddies when they were bending over to serve Voldemort. Malfoy is probably in on it. A nice way to clear the path for himself."

"Clear the path to what, Harry?" Hermione said. "Malfoy is not in on it. And we don't know if Malfoy ever was a Death Eater."

"You heard him, Lord Malfoy."

"He was just winding you up, Harry."

"You can't see what's right in front of you." Harry said. "He's in on it."

"What's the git done?" Ron said.

"He refuses to help look for Greyback." Harry said.

"Slimy git."

"No." Hermione said. "He just thinks it's a waste of time since Fenrir is a master of hiding. He said Fenrir will come to us."

"What, the plan is to attack the school, is it?"

"Malfoy doesn't know what the plan is, but he suspects so."

"Why are you defending him, are you in love with him or something?" Ron said.

"No!" She said with shock, although it was the second time someone had accused her, she should be getting used to it. "I'm just saying that we need more to go than your gut feel. I know you hate Malfoy and he truly is a reprehensible person, but that is not enough to start a war with the Slytherins."

"I know he is part of it." Harry said.

"No Harry, besides they attacked a Slytherin, Malfoy would never do that."

"Except the Slytherin in question was his ex." Harry said. "So you refuse to give us access to Malfoy Manor?"

"Yes."

"Then it's on your hands if anyone else gets attacked." He said and walked away.

"That is unfair, Harry." Hermione said.

Thankfully Lupin agreed with her, but the rift between her and Harry wasn't healed by that. Harry was still adamant that that Malfoy at least knew of Fenrir's plans if not the one guiding them. A fairly tense meeting occurred when Harry and his gang ran into a bunch of Slytherins at Gringotts a month or so later. It hadn't come to flying hexes, but wands were drawn.

And then came a letter from Malfoy addressed to Hermione asking for a union between Lisa Turpin and Theo Nott. She read the letter out at breakfast to Harry, Ron, Ginny and Neville.

"Now they're trying to steal our women." Ron said while Pansy came up and joined them. Hermione was getting used to Pansy. There had been the whole drama around Lavender getting upset that Pansy was still clinging to Ron for dear life. Ron didn't seem to mind and it was the death knell to Hermione's hidden dream of her and Ron being together. It still hurt a little though.

"Why Lisa, she's a halfblood." Neville said. "And Nott is a staunch purist."

"Lisa is going to flip." Ginny said. "I'm sure being with Nott would be her idea of a match made in hell."

"So why are they writing to me." Hermione said. "Surely they would be approaching Lisa."

"Pureblood marriages are arranged." Pansy said. "They are approaching you because you are in a leadership role, a parental role if you will."

Hermione just stared at her. "Marriage? That is ridiculous. We're not even out of school yet."

"Purebloods get married young and school is pretty much over." Ron said. "Most pureblood are married by the age of twenty."

"That's..." Hermione started, but the look on the other's faces said they were not as shocked as her.

"Although Turpin is a halfblood." Pansy said. "That is interesting."

Hermione knew there was something Pansy wasn't saying.

Hermione spoke to Lupin before she floo'd over to Malfoy Manor. Lupin treated it like a perfectly sensible request. Even though Lupin was on their side, it sometimes struck her that he was still a pureblood underneath it and totally bought into some of the odd pureblood ways. The same was true about Ron at times.

"Pureblood girls don't really get a choice in who they marry," Lupin said, "their parents decide for them."

"Yes well fine." Hermione said. "But there are no parents and besides, Lisa is not a pureblood, she is a half blood."

"But she has a pureblood father."

"What difference does that make?"

"This is a paternalistic society at heart Hermione. The Slytherins are likely expecting that Miss Turpin will stick to the old rules."

"The old rules are out." Hermione said.

"It is likely that not all people think so." Lupin said. "You must be mindful of that."

Hermione floo'd over to Malfoy Manor shortly after lunch.

"Malfoy!" She screamed, but heard nothing. Instead the tiniest little elf met her in the foyer.

"Can I assist you, Miss?" The little thing asked in a tinkerbell voice.

"I am looking for Malfoy."

"He is not here." The elf said. "He is at Gringott's bank."

It was so cute, Hermione just wanted to cuddle it, but she knew it wouldn't like that. Then again she hadn't met any elf youths before, she really didn't know what it would or wouldn't like. She was adamant that this little creature would not live its life in slavery. Servitude if it must, but not slavery.

Hermione floo'd over to Gringotts. The bank looked empty, but the large door to the vaults was open. She found them not far away, in front of another closed set of doors. They were obviously trying to break the charms.

"Oh dear, you're wealth is out of reach." She said. "That must be distressing."

"What do you want, Mudblood?" Zabini said. Hermione ignored him.

"I need to talk to you." She said to Malfoy.

"Is it necessary? I am busy." Malfoy said with a look of annoyance.

"It won't take long. We can have the discussion right here if you wish." Hermione said. "If you wish to approach Lisa Turpin, Nott will have to do so himself. There are no parents here, so you're going to have to approach her directly. I understand she'd rather die than marry Nott, so good luck." She threw Malfoy's letter down in front of them and strode away.

She heard footsteps behind her.

"We are aware that she is likely not in favour of the match." Malfoy said as he grabbed her by the elbow. "But we need this match. Nott needs it."

"Well, he is just going to have to pucker up and be charming." She said and yanked her elbow out of his grip. "Like I said, good luck."

"We will approach Lupin." Malfoy said.

"I've already talked to him." Hermione said. "I'm sorry, but the old social structure that allows you people to force marriage upon girls is gone. There is no one to pressure or impress."

"We're still the most prominent members of this society, a union with a Slytherin is a formidable proposal."

"Well from the look of it, Malfoy, you haven't got any more money than I do." Hermione said.

"We still have residences with strong wards and land." Malfoy said. "Enough to provide security and comfort in an uncertain world. You have to be considerate of the future."

"And the future for Nott is charm, chocolate and flowers, I'm afraid."

"She has said no then?" Malfoy said.

"I haven't even approached her." Hermione said.

"You do not have the right to withhold the offer. You must present it."

"I never said I would withhold it, but she will make up her own mind." Hermione said and she saw Malfoy's eyes narrow with annoyance yet again. She was a little worried and suspicious of Malfoy's aggression on this matter. Why Lisa and why were they so adamant?

Lisa was beyond surprised when Hermione told her of the offer. She laughed it off at first, but the offer seemed to weigh on her mind as the days went on.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

In the end, Lisa decided that she could not marry Theo Nott. Being shackled to someone who had been consistently nasty for years just didn't appeal, particularly as Lisa suspected that Nott was a chauvinistic pig to boot. Hermione was really proud of her, she didn't know Lisa well, but she respected her decision. So many girls would have been fooled by Nott's big house and wealth.

They owed a note over with Lisa's decision and returned their attention to more important matters. Hermione had been researching wards. She was worried that some of Hogwarts defences were failing, particularly the ones she didn't know about.

She got the library to herself these days. She actually wondered if she should bring her bed here and make this her room, but a library should be available to everyone and now that Lupin had started classes, there was the occasional kid in here.

Someone was approaching as she put heavy tome back on a shelf. She felt her arm being yanked back as she was turned to face Draco Malfoy.

"Not really approving of the touching, Malfoy." She said.

"She said no."

"I am aware."

"Well, she can't."

Hermione snorted. "Actually she can. Other people's decisions actually do matter, you know."

"We need her to union with Nott." He said. "She doesn't have to marry him if she doesn't want to."

"I think her decision is final." Hermione said.

"You have to convince her." He said and stroked his hand through his hair.

Hermione wasn't sure, but Malfoy seemed a bit rattled.

"I'm sorry, but she doesn't want to 'union' with Nott. Apparently he's been a prick to her for quite a while, so what did he expect?"

"She should be honoured by his proposal."

"I'm sure she was." Hermione said with obvious derision.

"It's not like she is going to get a better offer." He said as he noticed her ridicule. "The world might have changed, but we still have the property, the land and prospects."

"Maybe there are people who view prospects differently." Hermione said through her teeth. "Maybe putting up with your sunny personalities isn't worth whatever it is you offer."

He watched her for a while. "Such insipid sentiments aren't important. We are trying to rescue this society and stupid little sentimentalities are irrelevant."

"I wouldn't call putting up with an arsehole like Nott as stupid little sentimentalities." Hermione said, not quite believing he was so dismissive, but she guessed she shouldn't be surprised.

"We need her to union with Nott."

"She said no. I'm taking you are having a bit of trouble with that notion, it means it's not going to happen."

Malfoy shifted on his feet, he was angry.

"Nott should ask one of the Slytherin girls, they would fall over themselves from what I understand." She said. "That is what they're for." Hermione hated saying it, but it was the typical belief amongst the Slytherin girls, that they were for marrying wealthy Slytherins to lead a life of pampering, bitchiness and leisure.

Malfoy put his hands on his hips and looked down. "We can't..." He started. "We can't get our girls... pregnant."

Hermione felt queasiness cringe through her. "I don't want to hear about this."

"We can get the muggle girls pregnant at a drop of a hat, but we can't get our own girls pregnant."

"I really don't want to hear this." Hermione said and shot her hands up to cover her ears. She did not want to hear about the Slytherins' sex life. "That is disgusting, you are abusing those girls."

"Oh trust me, they are more than willing." He said pulling her hands away from her ears. "We can barely keep them off us."

"Go brag to your own cronies, I really don't care." She said and yanked her wrist out of his grip. "And don't touch me."

"We can't get our girls pregnant." He said in serious tone.

"Well..." Hermione said. "You've been inbreeding for centuries, its not really a surprise. Your numbers have been shrinking for a while, even before this thing happened."

"We can't let our lines die." Malfoy said. "That is not an option."

"Well, you have muggle girls who you say are happy to help out." She said with a desire to dry retch. Hermione was still very much a virgin and she felt uncomfortable having this conversation with Draco Malfoy of all people. She would blush profusely whenever Ginny

mentioned it, talking about sex with Draco Malfoy was about as far out of her comfort zone as she could get.

"We don't want muggle girls." He said.

"Your actions seem to indicate otherwise." Hermione said. "Lisa is out, she doesn't want you and she is much more concerned about her own future happiness than the preservation of your family lines. And rightfully so."

"No, not right. It is her duty to preserve this society."

"No, its your duty." Hermione said. "So go do some nasty stuff with a muggle and leave her alone."

"We can't allow ourselves to breed the magic out of our families." He said in all seriousness.

She was about to say that a union with a muggle might not result in that, but considering how damaged their genetic code was, the muggle partner's code was probably much stronger.

"Then keep trying, there are other girls who would probably be more receptive." Hermione said. "Try the more conservative Ravenclaws."

"More conservative Ravenclaws are pureblood and effectively close relations." He said. "We need half bloods or worse."

"Worse, huh?" Hermione said. He really had the finesse of a bull in a china store. She should have been offended, but the ridiculousness of the situation just made it funny. "Maybe you need to work on your approach."

"You might think this is a joking matter, Granger."

"It kind of is as far as I'm concerned."

"We need new blood."

"Funny you should mention blood." She said with more seriousness.
"You've been so allergic to it up until now."

"Needs must."

"If only you hadn't done so much damage to your chances before.
Ah, what a shame."

"Don't get too smug Granger, we'll be coming for you."

Hermione snorted as he turned to leave. Like she would ever, ever, ever consider it. Yuck. It was just the most ridiculous concept. Although it did bring up a serious question about her future, something she hadn't really thought about. She was so caught up in getting through the day, she hadn't had time to think about the future.

Ron was definitely not in her future vision any more. The fact that he was now going at it hot and heavy with Pansy was just the thing that made it a complete impossibility. She'd never even considered that he would be into Pansy enough in a million years to be with her in the way he was. It gave her the creeps. The whole idea of sex gave her the creeps.

Although both Harry and Ginny had also evolved their relationship in that way too and the Slytherins were apparently doing it with anyone who'd let them. It was like some madness that had just taken root and spread.

Lisa Turpin disappeared a few days later. No one saw what happened, she hadn't been in the fields as far as anyone would tell. The last anyone had seen her, she was on her way up to the Ravenclaw common room.

"The fucking Slytherins took her." Ron said.

Hermione couldn't argue, her conversation with Malfoy did make it likely that they had.

"We can't put up with this." Harry said. "We can't have them stealing girls as they see fit. That is not the society we want. Every girl in school would be terrified if we let this stand."

Pansy was obviously not looking like she agreed with every girl in school objecting to being stolen by the Slytherins and Hermione suspected that there was some truth to that, but that was completely irrelevant.

"You take us over there now, Hermione." Harry warned. "I don't care about your concept of diplomacy, we cannot let this stand. And we cannot just desert Lisa."

"I wasn't going to argue Harry, it hurt that would think I would." She said. "I will have to take you though one by one."

"We will have to be quick." Harry said. "I'll go first. We will be as quiet as possible until we have enough numbers to confront them."

Hermione and Harry stepped into the fireplace and cast the powder. They whizzed away and then bounced off a hard surface to end up back at Hogwarts.

"They've blocked me." Hermione said. "He's rescinded my access."

"I guess they knew we were coming." Harry said. "Bastards. We have to find another way."

"His wards are world class, Harry. We can't get in."

Harry picked up a chair and threw it. "Fucking bastard."

"I will go talk to Lupin." Hermione said. "We will figure out something, Harry."

She was pretty sure Harry didn't believe her, she didn't really believe herself. This was bad, bad, bad. Not only were they fighting the werewolves, they were going to war with the Slytherins as well. Lupin was going to be so disappointed in her. She hated being stuck

in this position, being appointed the diplomat in a situation that clearly was beyond diplomacy. But she had a feeling that Lupin was too rigid in his thinking to steer another course.

And worst of all was that Malfoy had indicated that they had plans for her as well. Well, she would put up one hell of a fight if they even thought of sneaking up on her.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Lisa Turpin's kidnapping caused quite a stir in the castle. Harry tried to do something about it, but he could not get near Malfoy Manor. Hermione sent a number of owls to Malfoy demanding the return of Lisa, but she got no reply.

Harry was not handling the adversity overly well. He hated feeling helpless and Hermione could sympathise with him. It had always been his responsibility to sort anything that was wrong and he felt it very personally when he couldn't. Ron just wanted to bash Malfoy, Hermione suspected that he didn't really give a stuff about Lisa and the situation that was imposed on her. Sometimes she wondered if Ron would really care if she got kidnapped or whether he would just be upset that the Slytherin had bested him.

Harry was still convinced that Malfoy and Fenrir were working together. She didn't think so, but Harry was so set against Malfoy, he wouldn't hear any other alternative. And then Lupin was expecting the world from her. She just wished she could get a little support. She was starting to dread the little talks she had with Lupin. He just seemed to refuse to acknowledge that they weren't all getting on and being one big happy family, and that things were quickly sliding in a whole other direction.

"This can all be resolved." Lupin said. "It just requires some patience and understanding."

"They kidnapped a girl." Hermione said.

"And it will be dealt with." Lupin said. "This action will be addressed properly within the context of the community."

"Well, at the moment, they are not playing along with the community context, they have locked themselves away."

"They cannot sustain themselves like that and they will come to realise it soon enough. The actions that have driven them to kidnap the girl will preclude them being able to lock themselves away, and they will come to realise that too."

"Meanwhile Lisa is stuck there."

"We will have to appeal to their sense of self preservation."

"They think they are driven by self preservation." Hermione said.
"They think they have to 'ensure the continuation of their families'".

"We will have to convince them that it is in their best interest that the cohesiveness of this community is in their best interest."

"But.." Hermione started but Lupin cut her off.

"But first we must have dialogue. We will never get anywhere without dialogue." Lupin said. "I will speak to Harry, but he does seem a bit bloody minded at the moment."

Lupin dismissed her and sent her on her way. She knew on one level, he was right, but sometimes he was just a little too strategic in his view of things. Not that she had any alternatives other than Harry's bash them until they beg strategy.

The only thing she could do was to keep trying to send owls to Malfoy, to appeal to his dubious civic notions.

She finally got a note back from Malfoy.

The girl is not being harmed. Nott just needed a chance to talk to her, roses and chocolate if you will.

D.M.

She wasn't quite sure about the note. Slytherins were in the habit of lying when it suited them, but she really liked to think that they weren't doing things to Lisa without her consent. The note indicated that Nott wanted to woo her, but she really couldn't see the Slytherins turning up the charm, although she heard that they were seemingly capable of doing so when they wanted to.

Hermione showed the note to Harry.

"It still doesn't make a difference." Harry said. "They can't just take people and keep them against their will."

"I know, but at least she's not being harmed."

"But they'll keep her until she does what they want."

"We don't know that." Hermione said, but she felt like she was grasping for straws.

She just wished she could be doing something simple. Like when she would go for a drive down to Brighton with her grandparents for the express purpose of buying an ice cream from the seaside. They still did it even when she was well into her teens. Just to sit in a car and watch the country side go by would be a nice thing right now.

But the petrol would be well gone by now. Maybe she could go and commandeer the Weasley car and just take off for a while. Just to do something other than dealing with endless dramas and crisis.

"I've received a letter from Malfoy." Lupin said a few days later. "It is a proposal of union between himself and you."

Hermione's jaw dropped to the floor, and she shook her head to make sure she was hearing things right.

"A marriage proposal if you will." Lupin said, and he wasn't disturbed by this idea.

"Uh..." Hermione started, but she didn't have anywhere for that sentence to go. She was still in utter shock. She just stared at Lupin until the anger finally came. "You have got to be fucking kidding! What in the world is he thinking? We can't stand each other."

"Well it is customary for males in his position to view factors other than likeability more weightily than other considerations."

"It's a pretty important consideration!" Hermione yelled.

"Perhaps you should think it over for a while." Lupin said. "It would go a long way to heal some of the rifts that have developed. It would be a beneficial union in many levels."

"I don't have to think about it, it is completely out of the question." Hermione stated with finality.

Lupin looked disappointed. "Shall I tell him no then?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, tell him no." Hermione said. "I will not ever 'union' with him." She stated just to it was absolutely clear.

"He has a lot of strong qualities, he would make a good partner for you."

Hermione stared at him like she expected he would drop dead from it.

"But if you are set against it, unfortunate as that may be, I will respect your wishes."

"Actually professor, your respect doesn't even enter into it. You have absolutely no say in it, lets get that clear."

"I meant no intrusion, Hermione." Lupin said.

"And you will not communicate on my behalf." Hermione said. "That is not your place."

Lupin nodded and Hermione took the opportunity to leave before she did something she might regret later, or may some day be a chargeable offense.

She was absolutely livid as she walked back to her room. Actually she didn't know where to go, but she told some unfortunate fifth year to 'fuck off' on the way.

The idea of Malfoy propositioning her was just ludicrous. She would have completely dismissed it as a prank if the Slytherins hadn't gone so far as to kidnap Lisa. And Malfoy had said they had plans for her, which meant that he likely knew he was going to proposition her when she spoke to him in the library.

She was so angry and confused, she didn't know what to do with herself. But she couldn't stop the tears from starting. She didn't mean to cry, but it was just coming. Things were so stressful, she didn't need this. And friggin Lupin and his stupid pureblood views, thinking he had any right to speak on her behalf. Well, he could stick it where the sun doesn't shine.

And now there was the potential that Malfoy would kidnap her once she told him to fuck off, just so he could try to convince her of his charm. That thought made her laugh, like it was at all possible.

Worst of all was that she didn't really have anyone to talk to. Harry would just fly off the handle, Ron was even worse. Ginny, well they never really had that kind of relationship. She just wanted her mum.

Hermione wrote a note to Malfoy that evening, stating in no uncertain terms what she thought of his proposal and his stupid notion that approaching Lupin would make things better. She sent the note off and felt some satisfaction. Although now there was the potential that they might kidnap her. She certainly wasn't going to go anywhere without a wand and she was ready for a fight. Unfortunately her work

included frequenting some pretty desolate and lonely parts of the castle and estate.

They didn't have a means of excluding the Slytherins from the castle, they were students and had access through the wards. They were working on it though.

Hermione could only marvel at how things had gone sideways so quick. The rift between the Slytherins and the Gryffindors were starting to move towards all out war. Lupin was mental and there were werewolves or Slytherins lurking around trying to steal them. Hermione would actually trade all this for Voldemort, she decided, but then felt bad because Voldemort would probably kill Harry and her. But she didn't mind leaving this world provided everything else was intact. Now she had nothing but stress and work, and a dubiously amorous Slytherin. She shuddered.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

The rifts in the castle only got worse. Groups had different ideas, but they were stuck together because people couldn't leave. There was news of another attack on one of the free living kids. Apparently the werewolves broke into the house and got one of the kids. Another escaped, but it sent any remaining free living students back to Hogwarts, except some of the Slytherin houses which were warded against full out war.

"We can't continue like this." Seamus said to the students in the Gryffindor common room. "We can't all live here forever. It isn't right that we hide away for protection, we can't accept a world where we can't walk the streets."

"What are we supposed to do? We can't find them." Harry said.

"How do we draw them out?" Ron said.

"Maybe we set a trap." Harry said. "Bait. They go for kids on their own, so let's tempt them."

"No Harry, its too dangerous." Hermione said. "What if something goes wrong? You would be handing someone over to them."

"Nothing is going to go wrong." Ron said. "The rest of us will be there when they attack, and then we'll let them have it."

"And nothing could possibly go wrong with that!" Hermione said.

"Well, what do you suggest, Mione? We can't just put up with being hunted like animals every time we go outside." Harry said.

"We have to think of a way of addressing this that doesn't put people at risk." Hermione said.

"People already are at risk." Harry said. "Doing nothing isn't going to change that."

"Malfoy said..." Hermione said before Harry cut her off.

"I don't care what Malfoy said." Harry said. "Malfoy is a creep and he would probably like nothing better than Greyback picking us all off."

"That's not true, Harry."

"Why are you defending him?"

"I'm not, I just want to approach this reasonably. With all available information." Hermione said. "And Malfoy, like it or not, does know some things about Greyback and how he works."

"Cause they were mates." Ron said.

"We're going to do it." Harry said. "If you can't handle it, stay home."

"Do something important like clean water pipes." Ron said.

"Oh, making sure we have running water, isn't important?" Hermione said, angry that Ron would belittle her so directly. "Compared with running off on some wild goose chase is a much better use of my time, is it?"

Hermione marched off. She was so angry with them, she couldn't be in the same space with them at the moment. It hurt that all the work she was doing to keep this place working was completely dismissed. That was gratitude for you, she thought.

She recognised that something needed to be done with Greyback, but it needed to be a communal decision with a plan attached. What the hell were they going to do with Greyback and his men if they did catch them, which Hermione greatly doubted. It was just going to be a big waste of time like all of their search parties over the last few months.

Well, she was not going to help, not if they treated her like that. If they were hell bent on wasting their time, they weren't going to drag her along with them.

The Gryffindor boys and some of the others spent a few days planning their operation. They were going to use Ginny as bait as far as Hermione could tell. Quite a few of them were involved and they were quite secretive about their plans, but it involved driving the werewolves to parts of the Ministry where it would be difficult for the werewolves to escape due to the anti apparition shields.

They didn't even know how many werewolves they would encounter. They did quite a lot of preparation, but Hermione refused to pay attention. She was still stinging from their rather unveiled belittlement of her and her efforts.

Their talking would cease as soon as she walked into the room and they waited until she left before they resumed. They amassed quite a few people in their little operation. Eventually Lupin joined in the planning as well. Some of the Ravenclaws refused to join, and they were considered as the new Slytherins because they opposed the 'greater objective'.

D-Day came. The tension in the Great Hall that morning was palpable, as was the excitement. Some of the younger kids were clearly jealous that they weren't allowed to join in. The boys were all dressed for battle, even some girls. Ron and Harry pretty much ignored Hermione, and it hurt. But she also knew this rift had been building, even before the Great Incident, as people were now calling it.

"We're going to sort this thing, Mione." Harry said to her as they were ready to leave. "It will be fine, you'll see. We're well prepared and there are a lot of us. We'll show them that they can't mess with us."

"Just be careful, Harry." She said and he smiled.

They floo'd away to do what they had planned. They had quite a bit of supplies with them, enough to last a few days. And then they were all gone. The general excitement in the castle died down and people got on with things they had to do. Some of the younger kids were practicing duelling, but it was more than evident that they had very little experience.

It was quiet in the Great Hall that evening. The evening meal was a light affair and most retreated to their common room to wait until the others returned.

Hermione was worried, she couldn't help it. For all their confidence, things go wrong and the worst would be if they lost someone. She had a bath that night and a fitful sleep. In all the ruckus, she had forgotten about Malfoy. He didn't seem to have tried anything, which was good. He was bound to have someone here who communicated with him. Still, he would be stupid to try anything, she would seriously hex his balls off, and she was pretty sure he knew that. She hoped he did anyway.

It was about lunchtime when she heard a boom that reverberated through the walls of the castle. She had no idea what was going on, but the students were panicking when the second boom was heard. She didn't even know what was going on or where it was coming from.

"We're being attacked." Frederich Asheniert said. He was one of the older, stropky Ravenclaws that Harry and his gang were complaining bitterly about. "We're undefended and now they are attacking."

"We'll just have to recall Harry." Hermione said. "I will send him a Patronus."

She did and followed in the direction that Frederich had gone. She joined the group of Ravenclaws and the odd Hufflepuff to see a group of around 25 trying to break down the Hogwarts wards.

"How many werewolves are there?" Someone said. "It looks like he's collected quite a few. He's been travelling, I'm sure."

Some of the group outside were young, but a handful were grown men. Men who had been werewolves before the Great Incident.

"The wards aren't going to hold them long."

"How soon will Potter be here?" Frederick said.

"He hasn't gotten back to me yet." Hermione said. "I'm sure he is on his way."

"He better be."

The Ravenclaws started to strengthen the wards. Hermione sent a second Patronus to Harry. She sent one to Ron too, just in case.

Still she got nothing back. She entertained an awful thought that maybe Harry's trap had walked into another trap, set to keep them away while the werewolves stormed the castle. They could not get through to the castle, that was not an option. She sent another Patronus to Harry, more urgent, more desperate.

"They're really strong." One of the Ravenclaws yelled. "We need to prepare for battle."

"We hardly have anyone who can hold themselves against these guys." Hermione said. "Most of the kids barely know how to deflect a hex."

"Well, you better think of something, because they are coming through the wards before long. So unless we want to have a different relationship with the moon, we have to do something."

"Evacuate the castle." Hermione said as she watched Greyback pace back and forth in front of the wards.

"And go where?" Frederick said. "If we split us, they will just pick us off one by one. We need reinforcement. Get the Gryffindors back."

Hermione ran back into the castle. She was going to have to floo to the Ministry. She found the nearest floo in Flintwicks office. She cast the powder and painfully bounced back. The Ministry floos were blocked. She was pretty sure this was not part of Harry's plan, which meant it was part of Greybacks. This attack on Hogwarts had been planned, and they had been played like a fiddle.

Hermione saw parts of the castle wards weakening. There was at the most a dozen of them that could survive a full on duel with a Death Eater werewolf. A dozen against twenty five was not great odds.

Although there was another group of could fight very well. Hermione sent a Patronus to Malfoy asking for urgent assistance and that they were under attack.

It took half a minute, but the fire eventually puffed and Malfoy's image appeared in it.

"So a direct attack." Malfoy said. "He never was much for tact. How many are there?"

"About two dozen." Hermione said sitting down in front of the wavering image of Malfoy's face.

"And you need help with that?" Malfoy said.

"The others aren't here." Hermione said.

Malfoy was quiet for a minute. "So where are the others?"

"Off setting a trap for Greyback at the Ministry, and now I can't get hold of them."

"You do realise that was planned, don't you?"

"I'm not stupid." Hermione said.

"Now about my proposal." Malfoy said.

"This is not the time to talk about your stupid proposal." Hermione said. "They are coming through any minute. Are you going to help us?"

"Are you going to help me?"

"Would you seriously withhold your assistance?"

"Yes, I have to." Malfoy said. "You'll never agree otherwise. As soon as you agree, we will be on our way. The cavalry to the rescue if you will."

"You would let us get wiped out?"

Malfoy sighed. "I have to protect my family, it overrides everything else, whether I like it or not. Now agree and we will be on our way."

"I don't believe that you would sacrifice us just to get what you want. Not even you are that cold."

"Then call my bluff." Malfoy said. "I need this union and you need my assistance. A perfect exchange, it will make both of our problems disappear. Nice and neat."

"You can't do this."

"Would you accept my proposal otherwise?"

"No."

"Then I can." Malfoy said.

It was quiet for a full minute. Hermione could hear the Ravenclaws getting more desperate outside.

"Sounds like its coming down to the crunch." Malfoy said. "Just relent."

"Fine." Hermione said. She couldn't think of any other options.

Malfoy disappeared and then stepped through the floo.

"I can't believe Potter up and left the castle undefended." Malfoy said. "Has he no brains at all?"

Blaise Zabini followed through the floo and then Theo Nott, Goyle, Crabb and others she didn't know well. The Slytherins kept on coming and Hermione had never been so happy to see them.

They walked out towards where the Ravenclaws were trying to hold the crumbling wards. There were younger Slytherins coming as well. Soon they had fairly good numbers compared to the werewolves.

"I love a good fight." Zabini said with obvious excitement as the walls were crumbling.

"Would you really have left us to it if I didn't agree to your proposal?" Hermione asked Malfoy.

He grinned at her. "No, but I needed you to agree. I just had to outwait you."

The wards were gone and the hexes started flying. The Slytherins were very good. Disturbingly good. They had obviously been trained to fight, and from the younger ones there, from a young age too. And they were using hexes that Hermione had never seen used.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

The fight went on for a while. Hermione hadn't been in a full-on fight since that night at the Ministry. She was terrified and exhilarated at the same time, but they were holding their ground. The Slytherins actually worked well together when they had to.

Fenrir was furious. Hermione could see him some ways away yelling at his people. Eventually they started retreating, and their retreat happened quickly once Harry and his gang showed up. They gave chase, but the werewolves apparated away as soon as they could.

"Late for the party, Potter." Malfoy said.

"They trapped us." Ron said. "We had to blast our way out.

"Amateurs." Malfoy said. The Slytherins were leaving and Malfoy turned to leave as well.

"Hey,..." Ron started to object but there wasn't really anything else he could say.

"What happened?" Harry said.

"They attacked us." Hermione said. "It seems they anticipated your plan and used it to get to us when we were vulnerable." Hermione watched the muscles in Harry's jaw work. He wasn't happy.

"I suppose you could always call on your mates for backup." Ron said.

"What Ron, are you pissed off that they came and saved us?" Hermione said. "The werewolves would have had us if it wasn't for the Slytherins, so don't give me lip about it."

Ron marched off.

"Harry.." She started, but he cut her off.

"I know, Hermione." He said and started to walk away. "But the Slytherins saved the day, so no harm done."

No harm done, Hermione said to herself. She felt the anger explode in her. No harm to him, she had to trade herself to save the people in this castle, but as far as he was concerned, no harm done. She didn't mention this however, it wasn't something she wanted to discuss. She had a rough idea of how Harry would take it and it wouldn't be good. She hadn't even gotten her own mind around it yet, so she certainly wasn't prepared to get in a fight about it.

In fact, she settled on a strategy of just cutting that little moment of time out of her memory, just pretended it had never happened. Surely he wouldn't hold her to it, although she knew that was a blatant untruth. She couldn't think of anything to do about it other than ignoring it.

Harry and Ron's bad mood persisted. It was embarrassing to them that they had been played so obviously by the werewolves. The mood of the whole castle was subdued, because everyone knew that they had come really close to being werewolf breakfast, or worse, awaiting the full moon.

Lupin took the incident particularly badly. He was insanely over-cautious about anyone leaving the castle, but the need for food overruled any such concerns.

Hermione couldn't deal with him at the moment, so she busied herself trying to repair some of the damage done to the castle during the fight. In fact, she didn't want to see anyone at the moment. Harry and Ron were still licking their wounds and not the most pleasant people to be around. The Ravenclaws were up in arms about the fact that the castle was almost taken. There were some talking about

them being safer on their own. All in all, they were not happy campers.

Luckily the Ravenclaws didn't end up leaving and soon things returned to normal. All except this one little niggle in the back of her mind. This one little ridiculous concept of her and Malfoy being 'unionised'. It wasn't even a concept that her mind could grasp.

She tried to analyse what it would mean. The purpose of it was to produce a Malfoy heir, so it would have to include sex of some form. Hermione had not spent a great deal of time thinking about sex. As a concept it was completely embarrassing. She knew in theory how things went, but it was not something she liked thinking about. Kisses yes, but anything beyond that was foreign territory.

She wiped the thoughts from her mind. It was too difficult to think about, especially as the purpose of said activities was a baby, which was equally a foreign concept. Not one that was entirely unpleasant, but something that had always seemed very distant. Hermione liked babies, but there had been precious few of them in her life.

All in all, she managed quite successfully to ignore that little pickle. She went about her business and no one ever asked her how she managed to get the Slytherins to help her. Maybe, she concluded, it wasn't out of the realm to expect them to help if they were in trouble, so maybe the agreement was just a moment of silliness that did not stand up to the cold light of day.

Her conclusion sat well with her and she started to think of it less and less, and she was still insanely busy where there wasn't a whole lot of time for her to spend on abstract ideas. There was still so much to do to keep this place running.

"Granger." She heard to her left as she walked down one of the third floor corridors. The voice made her jump and she couldn't quite place it although it was familiar.

She saw the blond hair first as he came out of the shadows.

"Malfoy." She said. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you."

"Outside the arithmancy classroom?" She asked. "How long have you been here?"

"Not long."

"There was no way of knowing I would come by here."

"I put a trace on you."

"You what?" She said in astonishment.

"You are my betroth, it is not unreasonable that I know where you are."

Hermione snorted, betroth, what an old fashioned word. Wait, what? The implications of what he was saying hit her.

"You intend to go ahead with this?"

"Of course."

"Can't you see it's a horrendous idea on pretty much every level."

"True, but there is one level for which it is a splendid and highly necessary idea." He said. He still stood about a meter away. It was dark in the corridor even though it might still be daylight outside, she wasn't sure.

"And you intend for us to marry?" Hermione said almost wanting to giggle with the ridiculousness of the concept. "Not strictly necessary."

"My son is not going to be a bastard." Malfoy said. "Not an option."

Malfoy's seeming knowledge of this supposed son was disconcerting, like he already knew this person. This person who would be her son, again a really abstract concept.

Her brain wasn't working and she tried to get it to work, get it to spit out something that would convince him that this was a really, really bad idea.

"So," he said slowly, "I think its time to start."

"Start what?"

"With the begetting."

"Oh." She said. "Oh! No."

"Why wait?"

"Because..."

"You did agree."

"Yes, but..."

"And a betrothal is legally binding." He said.

"Well, good luck trying to find a court that will try the case." She said.

"Don't pick a fight with me. I will have what is mine and you will not go back on your bargain." He said. "I do have the right to claim what is mine."

"I'm not a possession, you cannot just say that I am yours like you own me."

"I kind of can. Technically, legally, I own you."

"Like I said, good luck trying to find a court." She said. "You might not have noticed but there aren't many barristers around anymore."

"That doesn't mean the law doesn't matter." He said. "Don't overestimate what has changed. If I make my claim known, which I will to absolutely everyone, then no one can stand in my way."

"Like they would just hand me over." She said.

"Technically they should, but I am aware that your friends would not necessarily conform to the law, which means there would likely be a fight. A fight between the Gryffindors and the Slytherins. Some would say it was a long time coming, but inevitable. Would leave us all vulnerable to the werewolves too. And it would all be your fault. Not a great outcome of your diplomatic efforts." He said. "Or I could just take you. That is perfectly within my rights."

Hermione started to back away, he didn't pursue, he just stood there leaning against the wall like there was nothing in the world to worry about.

"I'll give you a week." He said. "Then I expect you at my house, or else you are going to be the cause of something very messy. A week and you are at my house."

Hermione walked away. She couldn't think of anything to do other than flee.

"In my bed." She heard him call from behind her. And then she heard him chuckle. She was trying her absolute hardest not to cry as she marched back to her room. She wasn't entirely sure why she felt like crying, she was feeling so many things and she couldn't pick them apart to make out any particular emotion.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Hermione was a bundle of nerves. She had agreed to marry Draco Malfoy. She was still kind of hoping she would wake up and this was all a nightmare. The kind where she'd wake up and wonder where that came from, because this is not something her mind would construe. The hope that it would all go away kept her from speaking to anyone about it. Lupin knew, but Hermione had lost all desire to seek his advice.

Harry and Ron would absolutely flip, which was part of the problem. Part of the devolution to chaos that Malfoy was referring to.

The days passed and no solution presented itself to her. She was hoping something would crop up and get her out of this. The only option left was to appeal to Malfoy.

Time went incredibly quickly and incredibly slowly at the same time. She dreaded the passage of time and was powerless to halt its progression. Before long, her week was up.

Harry and his crew were off chasing Fenrir. He was still smarting from being bested and having to be saved by the Slytherins. He was refusing to speak to her at the moment other than the basic civilities. They were adamant that they were not going to make the same mistake again, they always made sure the castle was defended and they had started duelling teaching to ensure the younger kids could help with the protection of the castle if necessary.

Hermione stayed in the castle to the minute of the end of her week and she determined that to be around the time that Malfoy had given her the ultimatum. And she was really pissed that he had given her an ultimatum, she wasn't a child. But equally, she couldn't ignore it because she couldn't quite dismiss the fact that Malfoy would likely

cause hell and she couldn't trust Harry not to flip and make things much worse.

She was kicking herself for agreeing, kicking herself for the panic that made her agree, but in hindsight, she still couldn't see any other realistic option but to agree.

She floo'd to Malfoy Manor and the wards let her in without any qualms. She stepped out of the foyer. The door to Malfoy's study was open. She stood on her spot and sighed. She has spent the last few hours trying to think of arguments for why this was a good idea and they primarily centred around the fact that a child's welfare was vastly improved with parents who didn't hate each other.

She slowly stepped towards the door.

"I see you found your way." He said from behind his desk.

Hermione didn't say anything as she took a tentative step inside the door. Draco leaned back in his chair and watched her. He was wearing a grey suit, not black. This was unusual and looked a little more grown up than the black suit which was his standard. The material was undoubtedly expensive and the tailoring was superb. "So here we are." He said.

She stared back at him with a challenging look that she hoped conveyed that he did not intimidate her. The look she had practiced for years on him.

"Blaise!" He called.

He got up from the chair and started to take his jacket off, which he proceeded to hand up on a coat stand. He stepped over to the side table and Hermione watched as he undid a cufflink. Who the hell wears cufflinks, Hermione thought. Then he rolled up the white shirt sleeve of his right arm.

Hermione had no idea what was going on when Blaise appeared behind her and Hermione automatically stepped aside to let him in.

"Shall we start then?" Malfoy said. Blaise went and stood by Malfoy and took out his wand.

"Start what?" Hermione asked confused.

"The ceremony." Malfoy said looking at her without any emotion. "We are being wed, remember."

"What? Now?"

"Yes. As we discussed last week."

"Wait!" Hermione exclaimed trying to get her thoughts organised. Her mind refused to organise with all the whirling thoughts. "This is a huge decision, we need to talk about it."

"No we don't. You agreed and hence now its happening. If it makes you feel better, I can assure you that I have given this a great deal of thought." He said and held out his arm for her to take it.

"We don't even get along." She said, trying to remember the arguments she had compiled in her head. "Isn't that important for a child, to have parents that like each other?"

"Its nice but not essential." He said. "Now chop, chop, we don't want to keep Blaise waiting, he has things to do."

"But.."

"Do I have to remind you what I said before. Securing my family's future is my one and only mission and I will not stop until that is achieved, no matter the cost. This will happen nice and easy now or it will happen later after a great deal of mess. I'm serious Granger, I will not stop until I achieve this."

"If it makes you feel better." He said. "This can be undone later if it turns out to be completely unworkable. In a year or so after the child is born, we can undo this if we want. Like I said, my son won't be born a bastard, but we can go our separate ways after."

Hermione was fidgeting.

"You gave me your word." He finally said. "I thought that meant something."

Challenging her integrity made her angry.

"I don't want to be with you." She said in a sharp tone. "I have commitments I can't walk away from."

"You don't have to give up your absolution to be the new Hogwarts grounds keeper if that is what your heart is set on." He said. "You are free to do as you wish. I won't be locking you in the dungeon if that is what you think. You just have to spend the nights here until such time as we have achieved our objective. After that, you can do as you wish."

Blaise sighed in exasperation. "She's not interested, mate. I don't know why you're wasting your time. You can find someone better. Someone who won't make your cock freeze up and fall off."

Hermione was furious at the blatant crudeness.

"Blaise, you're not helping." Malfoy said and he stepped forward and took Hermione by the wrist and dragged her back to where Blaise was standing.

"I helped you when you were in a lot of trouble at great personal risk to myself and my people on the agreement that you would do this for me." He said. "Now do as you promised."

Hermione was still angry and felt cornered, but she had agreed. He said so himself, this was a temporary thing that could be undone. For

the sake of a child. They needed children, lots of them and this one would heal some great rifts that had plagued this society for generations. This would heal those rifts and they would start fresh without these old prejudices being further reiterated. On the logical level, she could not turn her back on this. This was for the best, and it was a personal sacrifice that was temporary. In the scheme of things, a no brainer.

She took Draco's wrist like he held hers. His grip tightened around her wrist as Blaise started the incantation that would marry them. It was a variant of an unbreakable vow, just a little lighter on the do or die part.

Draco was watching her intently throughout. Blaise asked her consent to the vow first and she said 'I do' with a voice that was as steady as she could make it under the circumstances. Draco said his quietly without any hesitation and the magic soaked into their skin.

"Congratulations." Blaise said and put his wand away. He didn't say it with any kind of excitement. "Mrs. Malfoy."

The new title felt like a slap, it was so unexpected. She looked at Draco who was just looking back at her.

"I'll leave you two to ..." Blaise didn't finish the sentence and then walked away.

"Are you hungry?" Malfoy asked.

She was, she spent a lot of time hungry lately. She nodded.

"I would normally have a meal presented in the dining room, but unfortunately someone is living there at the moment. We will have to eat in my private apartment." He said and led her out of the study and up the large set of stairs off the foyer. They walked down a corridor or two and came to a set of dark lacquered doors.

"Welcome to the family." He said as he indicated for her to step inside. She stepped inside the large room, which was opulently furnished. She saw the parquet floor, the large windows, the bed. This was his bedroom. Hermione hesitated.

"The dining table is over there." He said. "It is a bit cramped, but such are the sacrifices we must face these days."

Hermione looked over at the dining table where a meal was on the table waiting. It was a huge bedroom, but it served as a whole apartment at the moment. She guessed Malfoy had to give over his other rooms for the other Slytherins who were staying at the Manor.

"Would you like some wine?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Have some wine." He said. "It will take the edge off." He handed a glass to Hermione.

"Wine is a bit of a luxury at the moment," he said, "as production had virtually stopped. Luckily our cellar will keep us going for a while. Hopefully long enough to bring production back up to required levels. We have made some steps in Italy to ensure this year's harvest is not wasted."

Hermione took the glass and took a sip. She had not had wine since the summer before the incident. Her parents had always wanted her to have an appreciation of it and they usually let her have a glass with dinner.

"Sit." He said and sat down at the table. She followed suit after a while, not really finding anything else to do with herself. "This is where you will be spending your evenings in the foreseeable future."

Hermione had a view of the bed off to the side and she had a lump of anxiousness in her stomach. She just realised that he had some expectations of that evening. Wedding night expectations. Hermione

took a big gulp of the wine. Wine might be a very necessary idea,
after all.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

She couldn't finish her meal, she could barely start it. She was feeling slightly queasy as it was. She watched Malfoy eat. He didn't seem to have any problem with the situation, at least not that he showed, and he probably wouldn't if he did.

This is not how she imagined her wedding night. She had always thought she would be in Italy or somewhere else warm and romantic. And certainly not with Draco Malfoy. She had never really considered him in such a light, it seemed too far flung an idea to even entertain. He was beautiful, in a very forbidding type of way. She used to never let herself admit that he was very attractive, she would always believe that his awful personality made him unattractive.

She tried to think of something to talk about, but she couldn't think of anything to focus a conversation on. She wondered if he hated her. All the prejudice he had, that he had now just waylaid. She understood why he did it, and she guessed it took something really drastic like the Great Incident to point out that they were in trouble and they were inbreeding themselves to extinction. But he had done a complete 180 and she wasn't sure how someone changed so quickly to do exactly the opposite of what their life long credo were a few months back.

They both knew he needed her, but she wondered if she disgusted him. It was pretty awful if he did. He was finished eating and was sipping his wine.

"How old is this house?" She asked.

"Built in the 17th century, but built on top of an older structure. My family has been here for centuries. You can still see the older structure in the foundation." He said and prattled on about things

related to the house. Hermione stopped listening and just watched him talk. It still struck her as completely surreal that she was going to have a child with this person. And although she had always focused on how similar they were in order to point out the holes in his beliefs, it struck her how foreign he was to her and her perspective on life. He wasn't like Ron who was a lot like her in their approach to new things, but had some quirky attitudes due to his family's background. Draco was fully engrained in a culture that had no links with her own.

"Do you need a bath?" He said and looked at her.

"What?" She asked, being pulled out of her own thoughts. He continued to look at her and she finally clicked onto what he was referring to, whether she wanted a bath before bed. Which was basically saying bed was next on the agenda.

She felt the lump of nervousness in her stomach churn again and it was constricting her throat. She didn't need a bath, she had washed before she came, but she wondered if she wanted to delay the next chapter of the evening. If she did, she would be in the bath with it preying on her mind.

She shook her head. He lifted his hand upwards from where he was smoothing down his napkin. He was indicating for her to take his hand. She was supposed to slip her hand into his, to touch him on purpose. Something she couldn't recall doing before, ever. And they wouldn't be just touching, they were going all the way. She'd never even let a guy touch her under her bra before.

"I'm..." She started, but her voice failed. "I'm..." She started again. "I'm inexperienced." She finally spat out.

"I had guessed that." He said. "I will try to go easy on you. Come." He said and held out his hand again.

Hermione slowly took it after a few frantic thoughts of running for the door. He coaxed her out of her chair and led her over towards the bed.

"This is the most natural thing in the world. People do it every day." He said. She nodded. She knew it was true, but she was scared.

He stopped by the bed and pulled her in front of him. He was taller than her, and she now knew how much taller. His hand came up to her cheek and she flinched. He stroked her cheek and continued down her neck.

"Your eyes are as big as saucers." He said with something between a grin and a smile. "You don't have to be afraid. I won't bit. It will hurt the first time, but its not that bad. You're a big girl, you've been through much worse than this.

She nodded and his fingers roamed down to unbutton the top button of her shirt. She felt trapped and started to hesitate. He stepped closer and kissed her. She accepted the kiss, kissing was good, it was familiar territory. It was a gentle kiss and he tasted lovely, a little bit of wine and cinnamon from the desert.

She felt a bit of heat as the kiss deepened. She felt his chest against hers, pulling her closer. His hand was around her back and it felt ... nice. Until he reached up for the clasp of her bra. This was unfamiliar territory and she hesitated again. She withdrew from the kiss, but he was still close, having moved to explore her neck.

His fingers were pushing her shirt off her shoulder and a battle was raging in her head between the part that felt this was nice and exciting, and the part that was scared beyond reason. She steeled herself, she was supposed to be brave, she admonished herself.

She was bare from the top up and he was holding her close to him, skin against skin, and that was nice. A lot further along than she had ever been before. And there was another part of her that was dead curious. She had certainly seen boys with their shirt off, even quidditch toned boys, but never this up close, with the possibility of touching.

He was incredibly warm, belying the wintery looks of him. He pulled her closer and lifted her up and she felt herself being held tightly to him as he shifted her. And they were on the bed. He was kissing her again and she tried to focus on the familiarity of kissing. She clinged to it. She felt his tongue stroke the very sensitive line on her lower lip and it made her shiver a bit.

But he started stroking her thighs and the nervousness overrode the delicate sensations of the kiss. He was coaxing her thighs apart. She made a little whimpering sound.

"This isn't as scary as you think it is, Granger." He said. "The first time is never fantastic, but don't let your imagination run away."

He was stroking her cheek with his thumb. "It will be fine. You'll see."

She knew he was being gentle and she appreciated it, and really appreciated that he wasn't making fun of her. Considering who it was, it was pretty astonishing. She kind of felt that she could trust him, in this small little thing. She relaxed the tension in the legs a bit and he nudged her thighs apart a bit. She realised they were both naked. Completely naked. And now it was crunch time.

He kissed her again and she tried to focus on that, over the shifting around further down. Strange sensations and then pain. She gasped and he stopped.

"Hush." He whispered. "Done now."

He were still for a while. The stinging sensation peaked and started to retreat. He moved and Hermione was feeling strange tension. He moved more and the strange tension continued. She wasn't sure what the sensation was, it was just strange. He was moving quicker, she felt the straining of his body.

Ok, it wasn't bad, she admitted to herself. She could focus a little more on what was going on over the fear that was rampaging through her head. He was moving more rigorously now. He had his

'beep' in her 'beep' and they were officially doing 'it'. And it was utterly surreal.

His breath was becoming more uneven and he was straining more. She knew intellectually that this felt good for him, but it looked like pain. He thrusts were slowing down and a final deep and harder one, one that felt ... interesting. Again a sensation that she couldn't describe, tension in her body.

He collapsed on her and was breathing heavy.

"See, not so bad. It won't hurt again." He said when he'd calmed down enough. "Well, not until you're ready." He said with a grin as he rolled over and stretched.

Hermione pulled the sheet up to cover herself. He didn't. He was still for a few minutes and Hermione watched him.

"What time do you want to go in the morning?" He said. "I will set the alarm."

"Six." She said.

"An extremely unsociable hour. I'm pretty sure the place won't fall down if you don't arrive before sun up."

"I have a few things to do." She said.

Draco grabbed his wand and did an incantation on the clock, on himself, her and the bed. The lights faded, not entirely, but enough. He stretched out again and settled down. Hermione watched him as his breathing settled down into a slow and steady pace.

She still clung the sheet to her, not knowing what to do. Her mind was buzzing too much to let her fall asleep like he just had. She didn't want to move in case she disturbed him. It was a strange feeling trying to get to sleep in a bed with someone else in it.

'Hermione Malfoy', she said in her head. It sounded really strange, and the idea of it was even stranger. She looked at him again. She had never seen him sleep before. His fingers were resting on his chest as it moved steadily up and down.

He had been very kind to her tonight, she knew. She had not expected it and would always be grateful. She didn't think he had it in him to be kind.

What the hell had she gotten herself into? She had just had sex with Draco Malfoy. His little swimmer were inside her doing heaven knows what. The thought had emotional context she didn't understand. Could the world possibly get any more upside down?

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

She actually slept and the alarm woke her up with a start. She felt completely awkward slipping out of bed with nothing on. But Draco didn't turn around, he was facing away from her, sleeping. A sight she never expected to see. She dressed as quietly and started to leave.

"See you tonight, Granger." She heard behind her as she slipped out the door.

The castle was quiet as she stepped out of the floo. She walked to her room and showered. She felt she deserved a bit of the reserved tea and made a cup which she took out to the square and sipped as she was sitting on a rock. She knew it was ridiculous but she wondered if she looked different.

With a sigh, she wondered yet again what she had gotten herself into. She reiterated in her head that it was for the best, for the future of this society. And it hadn't been that bad, he had been considerate, which gave her hope. She also wondered how in the world she was going to tell Harry. 'Oh by the way, I married Draco Malfoy to ensure good relations between the groups.' He would look at her like she was insane, he would assume she was insane, or worse.

Maybe she could bring it on slowly, maybe by expressing an interest in Malfoy and then letting it grow, so it would seem natural, but a relationship between her and Malfoy wasn't natural anyway you cut it.

She rubbed her head hoping something useful would fall out of it. If she told Harry the truth, that she agreed to marry Malfoy because Harry left the castle undefended, he would never forgive himself and

would do anything he could to rectify it, which will do a barrel full of damage to the fragile relations between the groups.

She would have to think of something, because if Malfoy managed to get her pregnant, it was going to become obvious. Although she could just refuse to tell anyone who the father was, but Malfoy would likely ruin such plans. While Malfoy'd been kind last night, she had no illusions that he had turned into a complete sweetheart because she went to bed with him. He was still Malfoy. And in person much bigger than she had anticipated when viewed up close. And he kind of smelled nice too.

She blushed and groaned into her hands again. She had work to do, but she didn't feel like it. An extra half hour pondering her situation wasn't going to kill anyone. Problem was, it wasn't solving anything.

She sat on her rock and watch Ron and Pansy walking along one of the halls to breakfast in the Great Hall. A bizarrely odd couple, but as of yet, it hadn't died in a fiery fight as she would have expected.

She wondered why Pansy wasn't with the Slytherins and the nature of her and Draco's relationship. It was no secret that they used to be an item. She wondered if Malfoy knew that she was with Ron.

She didn't see much of anyone that day, they were out chasing Greyback and weren't returning until well after dinner.

Hermione spent an hour wondering when she was supposed to go to Malfoy Manor. Was she expected to dine there, dine with him, or much later just to go to bed. She went back and forth with her options and decided that she should go for dinner in case Malfoy expected such and came looking for her if she didn't show up. She wasn't ready to explain that one.

Malfoy Manor was quiet as she stepped out of the floo. She walked over to Malfoy's apartment and only came across a younger Slytherin she didn't know on the way. The boy didn't pay her any attention, just walked passed.

Malfoy was in his room.

"You're lucky you got through." He said. "The floo connection failed today, Blaise is over at the Ministry trying to stabilise it. I guess he has it sorted then."

The tiny little elf walked into the room with a rolling cart filled with their meal.

"Just in time, too." Malfoy continued. The elf did its work and left.

"You better not be working that elf too much, it is just a juvenile."

"Would you prefer to be served by one of the muggle girls?" Malfoy said.

Hermione couldn't quite decide which was worse.

"You're perfectly capable, you don't need to be served."

"Don't be tiresome." Draco said. "That is the way things have been done for centuries and I am not about to change it, so just get used to it."

He was grumpy. She wondered why, was it her or had something else put him in a foul mood. Maybe the marriage between himself and a mudblood didn't seem like such a good idea the day after. But she didn't know how to broach the subject, so instead she sat down and ate of the meal. The meal was much better than the ones they managed to serve at Hogwarts.

"Where is Lisa Turpin?" Hermione asked after she'd finished.

"She is around." He said. "She is fine."

"Can I see her?"

"Not tonight." He said. "You can see her any time you want during the day."

"I'm not here during the day."

"I am certainly not stopping you from being here during the day."

This conversation was not going well. Hermione wanted to go home. She rubbed the bridge of her nose in annoyance and dismay. This was never going to work, she thought to herself. They had nothing to say to each other, they didn't like each other for heaven's sake.

"How is Potter's search going?" He finally asked.

"They come across things, but Greyback and his people are moving constantly." She said.

"They are going to try again." Malfoy said. "Not yet, but they will be planning it."

"How do you know?" She asked.

"I know how he works." Malfoy said. "He attacks and the only place it to attack Hogwarts, or here."

"You think he might attack here?"

"Maybe, but we are well protected and we don't send little witches and wizards out to work the field. He wants magical children and you put your out of the wards like temptation."

"We need to eat."

"We manage to eat without exposing ourselves."

"But you expose others."

"Others that he doesn't want. There are tons of muggles out there if he wanted them, but he doesn't. Muggles are of limited usefulness when it comes down to it. And a muggle based werewolf is practically useless to him in his schemes."

"To control the world."

Draco nodded. Hermione knew that he was suggesting that they needed to get muggles to work the fields if they wanted to ensure that their people were protected. Hermione didn't want to hear it. It was immoral to use muggles for labour. It wasn't a decision they could make. They, the Gryffindors, didn't trade principles for security. Although there was a part of her that wondered sometimes if these values were strictly Gryffindor or whether they were hers and Harry's.

She didn't want to think anymore. She didn't want to give up her morals, it would be a severe compromise. The whole point of Harry trying to get Greyback was so they didn't have to.

"We need to destroy him." She said.

"I know."

"Will you help?"

"I am not running around wasting my time." He said obviously referring to Harry's activities.

"But when the time comes, will you help."

"Yes."

Hermione felt relief. The coming fight with Greyback was praying on her mind. People were going to get injured, they might even die, not that they weren't already, but she wasn't ready for one of her close friends to die.

"Come." Malfoy said.

It pulled her out of her morose thought into a new set of morose thoughts. He wanted to go to bed. Her mind was screaming no and she stayed put. She just couldn't, it wasn't something she felt she

could do. To be so exposed. Which didn't make sense because she'd already done it once, why was it now so out of the question?

"Come on." He said again and she shook her head. "What is the matter?"

"This isn't right." She said.

"What do you mean it isn't right, you're my wife."

"We don't even know each other, we don't like each other." She exclaimed. "I can't do this."

"You promised."

"Maybe you were asking too much." She said. "I can't." She couldn't help it but she started to cry. She tried to stop but couldn't. She heard him sigh, she knew he was annoyed, but she didn't care.

"Just come to bed." He said after a while. "I won't touch you tonight, I promise."

She did as he said, she was too emotionally drained to argue, and she was in desperate need to lie down. But she wasn't getting undressed. She conceded the shoes, but that was it. She lay down on the side facing the wall. He lay behind her, close but not touching.

She felt him stroking her hair. "You will get used to this." He said. "You'll get used to me. Its not easy being a bride, there are significant life changes involved."

"You're supposed to love each other." She said.

He chuckled. "Sometimes I forget how different you are from us."

He continued to stroke her hair lightly. She didn't quite know what to make of his last statement. On one level it was a complement because he said he forgot that she was different, on the other, she was different and in this specific instance it was about love.

Chapter 18

A/N – Apologies this chapter was long in coming, sometimes my muse goes on holiday.

Chapter 18

Hermione went home and changed the next morning. She wasn't quite sure what to make of the previous evening. She was grateful that Malfoy hadn't forced anything. She still didn't know what to think about the whole thing, it hurt her head to think about it. But she forced herself to. She had to know what happened to Lisa, so she decided that she would go back before lunch and see if she could find her. She would have to help her if necessary.

Malfoy Manor was quiet when she floo'd back a few hours later. She called the little elf and asked it to take her to Lisa. It complied and she followed it's strutting down one of the halls. She wondered how many people lived here. It was large enough to be an apartment complex. She couldn't imagine what a tiny family like the Malfoys would do with themselves in a large house like this. You would never find anyone.

Finally the elf led her to a door and then departed. Hermione knocked quietly on the door and waited until it opened a fraction.

"Lisa?" She asked and the door opened wider. Hermione was relieved to see Lisa. She was in a dressing gown.

"Hermione." She said. "Come in."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"I came to check on you, I've been, we've been worried."

"I'm fine." Lisa said. "Do you want something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Are you sure you're fine? I can take you back to Hogwarts if you want."

"Are you the rescue mission?" Lisa said with amusement. "Don't worry, I'm fine."

Hermione sighed with relief. "I tried to negotiate with them, but they made it impossible."

"Did they now?" She asked, but it was more of a statement.

"I was worried they were treating you badly."

"I didn't come by choice." She said. "But Nott was pretty persuasive."

Hermione felt concern crinkle up her brow.

"Did he...?"

"He didn't force me." She said. "But he was persuasive and I did succumb ridiculously easily."

"You don't have to stay here. They can't just take people as they like." Hermione said.

"I know, but the sex is kind of hot." Lisa said. Hermione hadn't expected that and she didn't know what to say.

"Look," Lisa continued, "we've agreed that we are going to have a child. I hear you are following a similar objective. It's a new world, a dangerous world and it won't hurt to be aligned with these guys. They are fiercely loyal to their own and in an uncertain world, protection is important."

"We are not one of them, though." Hermione said. "They're just using us."

"Family is of upmost importance to the Slytherins. If you're family, they will protect you till death. They realise that the pureblood bloodline has become untenable, so they adapt. They have the whole bloodline mapped out and they know exactly what they need to do to ensure the strength of their future generations. And its new blood. Perhaps its you that needs to let go of the old prejudices."

Hermione gasped. She was offended by the accusation that she was prejudiced.

"Glad to see that you are fine." Hermione said tightly. "I will leave you to it then."

Lisa shrugged and Hermione let herself out. The whole exchange left a bad taste in her mouth. This was a pure transaction to Lisa and it sat rather badly with Hermione. Especially because her thing with Malfoy was also a transaction, and that was not how relationships were supposed to be. Although with the purebloods, relationships were always a transaction, alignment of families for political or economic gain. Or for the right blood and new blood was the flavour of the day.

She knew that it wasn't a flavour of the day. They had finally fully realised that the pureblood's inbreeding was harming them and they had adjusted to a new reality. It made perfect logical sense and logical sense appealed to her greatly. It was just that, love was not supposed to be logical, it was the exciting thing about it. Not that this had anything to do with love.

This was for the best, she assured herself. The best for this society, for the future generation and the integration of the factions that the developing war had forced before the Great Incident.

She spent the afternoon down in the bowls of the castle, trying to rid the castle of an encroaching vermin problem. She was dusty and

tired, but the brain numbing activity was just what she needed that afternoon.

She washed up and departed for Malfoy manor just after dinner had finished. No one noticed that she left every night, and it hurt a little that it was so ridiculously easy to be unnoticeably absent.

"Are you hungry?" He asked when she walked into his apartment.

"A little." She said as the glorious smell of roast chicken hit her. She had to admit, it was much nicer than the soup they'd served at Hogwarts. She felt like a traitor sitting down to succulent roast chicken.

The conversation seemed to flounder. He asked what she'd done that day. She told him and then there was little else to say.

"It seems the days are growing a bit longer, finally." He said.

She nodded, looking out the window which was now pitch black.

"Do you want a bath?" He asked after a while.

"No, I had a shower before I came." She said. "I really was covered in cobwebs." But the implication of bathing made her stomach tighten up and the scrumptious chicken didn't sit so well now.

"Come on then." He said and took her hand.

This is for the best, she repeated in her head. And she wasn't exactly afraid now, she knew what was involved and she also knew it wouldn't hurt this time. But she couldn't help being... nervous.

When he'd led her to the bed, he pulled her close in front of him. He was only wearing a shirt and she could feel the heat from his body. He was looking at her and she was desperately trying to look somewhere else.

She felt his fingers on the top button of her shirt and her breath hitched in her throat. Another button and she felt the tips of his fingers stroke her skin.

"So timid." He said.

She wasn't sure what to make of that observation. She was not timid, well maybe in this respect. She felt him pull her closer with his lips on her brow bone. He was moving lower to hers. She felt a flare of panic before her lips were covered by his, and that seemed to shake reality a bit. He was, she conceded, an excellent kisser.

When the kiss broke, her bra straps were coming down her arms. She went to cover herself, but his hands stopped her. She could feel his breath on her skin and it was giving her goosebumps.

"Your skin is absolutely perfect." He said. "Soft." He wasn't really speaking to her, more thinking out loud.

He pulled his shirt over his head and they were both topless. His skin was warm. An abstract concept of male versus female entered her head, in a way it never had before. He was male and he wanted her. Not in an 'ask you to the dance' way, a much deeper, baser want. It was scary and exciting.

Her arms reached around her and lifted her to him. Her front was smushed to his and she felt the bed on her back as his weight came down on her. He was kissing her neck and it felt good, but it was still scary.

His hand roved all over her body, stroking over her breast, which sent thrills of forbidden sensation. He grabbed her hands and pushed them above her head. He was looking at her, she knew, but she refused to open her eyes. She didn't want him to see what she was feeling. To see that she was afraid, even though she wasn't entirely sure why. She knew what was coming and it wasn't much to fear, but she was still afraid.

She could feel his hips against hers, grinding slightly, wanting access. He moved down her body, trailing kisses down her skin. He licked her nipple and she sneaked.

"There is no reason to be afraid." He said mumbling into her stomach.

"I'm... I'm not."

He looked up as he flicked open the button on her jeans.

"Sure?" He asked.

She nodded. She was damned if she would ever admit that she was afraid of him. His hand stroked her abdomen as he pulled the jeans down. She did miss the heat of his body. She felt cold, but not really cold when he wasn't on her.

He was kissing much lower now, far down her abdomen and she was feeling very uncomfortable. He was awfully close to her privates and that was ... exposing. She could feel his breath, but he moved higher again to her relief.

"Its ok to touch me too." He said. "Anywhere you want."

She swallowed. She didn't know what to do. She settled for touching his waist. His skin was warm and smooth. He was kissing her again and she forgot all about his waist. It was a much deeper kiss, fully exploring her mouth and she seemed to lose her train of thought.

Until she felt pressure on her privates, which brought her back.

"Hush." He said. He was entering her and she didn't know what to do. He watched her and she searched his eyes. He kissed her again and she felt battling sensations. And then it was he was there, inside her. The oddest sensation of being filled. A pressure that intensified when he moved.

It felt like something she should avoid, but she couldn't. It flared everything he sunk into her completely. It felt like she was being dragged under water and if she didn't fight, she would drown.

It was becoming harder to fight it as he was moving faster with his breathy groans echoing in her ear.

"Stop fighting me." He said with a smile. "Let it flow."

You let it flow, she thought angrily, I'm drowning.

"Trust me." He said through raspy breaths.

Like hell, she said in her mind.

His thrusts were slowing and he was tensing up. She remembered this part. She felt a sensation pulling her under but she fought it. And then it was over. He collapsed on top of her.

"Not so fearless today, my little Gryffindor." He said with amusement.

"I am glad I am amusing you."

His fingers were trailing circles on her side. "If you'll stop fighting me, I will more than amuse you."

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

There was another attempted attack on the students in the fields. They successfully fought the werewolves off, but it upset everyone.

"This has to stop." Harry said in Lupin's office to the group of people who tended to do the planning for the school. "We can't go on living like this."

"They probably will attack the school again." Susan Bones said. "We have fought them off, but they are still trying."

"So we prepare for attack." Ant Goldstein said. "We know they will."

"They will probably try to lure Harry away like they did last time." Lupin said. "Which should indicate that they are ready to attack. So we watch out for a potential ploy to call us away."

"They will be better prepared this time."

"It wouldn't hurt to have the Slytherins on our side." Lupin said. "They were amenable to assist during the last attack, they would hopefully be willing to do so again. What do you think Hermione?"

"Uhhh." Hermione started, trying not to look as uncomfortable as she felt. "We can ask."

"I think we need to meet." Harry said. "So we can plan properly. I would be more comfortable with them owning up in front of us rather than just what they say to one of us."

"Can you organise a meeting?" Lupin asked Hermione and she nodded.

Hermione arrived at Malfoy Manor late that evening. Everyone seemed to need her to do something that night. Malfoy wasn't happy about her tardiness, but he wasn't particularly angry either. Hermione grabbed a few morsels of the now cold dinner as she completely missed dinner both here and at Hogwarts.

Malfoy was sitting at his desk, leaning back in the chair and watched her. It made her uncomfortable, even more so as he stood up and came towards her.

"It's late." He said quietly. "And duty calls."

His hand came up to her neck and his thumb was stroking her skin. His attention was completely focused on her person.

"There is something I need to talk about first." She said.

"Talk away." He said, but his attention was on her body, not on her or what she was saying.

"This is important." She said as he started to unbutton her shirt.

"Uh huh." He said absently.

"The Hogwarts people want to have a meeting to discuss the Greyback problem. They think Greyback is planning another attack."

"I told you so much." He said, he was kissing her neck now and she had to steel herself to remember the objective of this discussion.

"We need you to help us." She said.

"Is that right?" He said without any surprise, but his attention was on his hands roaming her belly.

How had he managed to get her shirt off, she wondered. She hadn't even noticed.

"Tomorrow, will you do it?" She said. "At Hogsmead, at 2 o'clock."

He didn't answer.

"Will you?" She repeated.

"And what will you give me?" He said playfully.

She glared at him. "I will come back tomorrow." She said tightly. She felt him stiffen.

"You will come back until you are well and truly knocked up." He said seriously. "That was what you agreed to."

"Then don't put me in a position where I need to choose."

"Fine. I will go, but I am not going to tolerate you trying to manipulate me by threatening not to go through with your agreement every time you want something."

"Well for future references, I need to ensure the safety of our people. It not a responsibility I take lightly, and neither should you."

"I am not the one putting my people at risk by parading them like candy outside of the wards."

"I don't want to talk about this now, just show up tomorrow." She said. "Please."

"I already said I would." He said. "Now lay back and think of England."

She wanted to curse him. She was offended, but the bitter truth was that she had agreed to this to benefit the future of this society. It just rubbed her the wrong way that he pointed it out so eloquently.

They had sex on the dinner table that night. It was a bit more clinical and Hermione still struggled with the tension of him being inside of her, but there wasn't the same threat of drowning as the previous night.

They waited in the Three Broomsticks at two the next day. The place had been drained of all forms of alcohol. Hermione hadn't realised that people had been commandeering the stock at pub, but she guessed she knew little of what people had been up to on the sly. She certainly had her secret. A bit of a shocker in some respects.

She watched Ron and Pansy canoodling in one corner. At least they didn't keep their activities secret. Ginny was absent, having to sort out the dinner roster.

The Slytherins arrived twenty minutes late. There were five of them, Malfoy, Zabini, Nott, Goyle and Vaisey.

"Thank you for coming." Lupin stated. "It is imperative that we discuss our strategy for dealing with Greyback and his group before they do any real harm to this school and the students within it."

"Aren't you one of them?" Vaisey asked.

"I am indeed infected with the werewolf virus, but I assure you, I have no affiliation or support for Greyback. He is a monster and we are collectively better off with him dead." Lupin said. "My affliction is controlled by potions but it weakens in many respects, so my usefulness is unfortunately limited. However, collectively we are strong, much stronger than Greyback. He is above all an arrogant and deluded man, who I suspect believes can take us if we are divided. His aim is to divide us, so we must not let him. It is imperative that we work as a unit because that is where our strength lays. We must nip this blight in the bud. Our future depends on effective dealing with the problem that Greyback presents."

They were silent as Lupin's little pep talk echoes through the room.

"Now I am sorry, but I must excuse myself. I know you are all capable of planning what needs to be done." He said and swept out of the room.

Hermione could not understand him, what could be more important than being here.

"They are more likely to attack here." Harry said. "Most of the kids that left the school have returned to the Castle, although we do not know the state of many of your kids."

"They are safe." Malfoy said. "Our wards were excellent. Most set by Voldemort himself. Beyond Greyback's capabilities to break them."

A fissure of uncomfortableness went through the group.

"They won't last forever." Harry said. "They will weaken."

"Yes, but not as fast as Hogwarts due to its size." Draco said. "And Greyback knows a lot about the Hogwarts wards. No one has any idea about what our wards contain and probably wouldn't want to know. He will try Hogwarts before he tries ours, it is a certainty."

"And will you help us when he tries?" Harry asked.

"Yes." Malfoy responded.

"How can we trust you?" Ron piped up. "You've said many times how the world would be better off without us."

"It's a very different world now." Nott said.

Ron huffed.

"We've lost most of our population. We are very much at threat, irrespective of Greyback. He is a pest, but we have bigger problems."

"Like no one wants to be with you, so you have to steal girls." Ron said tartly.

Malfoy rolled his eyes in dismissal. "We don't know what Voldemort did when he wiped out the adults. We don't know if its still active, or

dormant, or gone. For all we know, it could happen again any second. Maybe its still around and will wipe us out when we hit a certain age. Maybe it will do so spontaneously on an annual basis."

"No one has disappeared so far." Harry said.

"And what does that mean?" Nott said. "Our population is miniscule and we don't know if a bunch of us is going to be wiped out each year. We will just have to wait and see. If it does, our population will get smaller and smaller, until there isn't enough left."

"And you're weak to begin with." Dean said.

"We're not weak!" Goyle stated.

"And so are you." Malfoy said. "Mistakes of the past plague you just as much."

"Not to the same degree." Frederich Asheniert said.

"You're related to practically every girl in the school." Nott said. "It can take years for purebloods to breed. We might not have years, we might not have one."

Silence fell over the room.

"But we are not as weak as you." Asheniert continued. "You are the ones who weaken us."

"But if you lose us, you lose a quarter of the population." Zabini said. "That will only make the pool smaller in the future, which will inevitably weaken you too. We can't stick with our own. We need non Slytherin girls. You need to take the Slytherin girls, so we can strengthen the whole group."

"No stop." Hermione said. "This is ridiculous, you can't trade girls like this. We are not cattle."

"We have to." Nott said. "This is a measure of necessity."

"But we are better off without you." Harry said.

"Are you?" Malfoy said. "Then why are we here today? Oh yeah, you need us to help you defend Hogwarts. I know it hurts your pride, but you need us, and unfortunately, we need you, your girls at least."

"I want Tracey Davies." Asheniert said to Harry.

"She's taken." Zabini said with force.

"Fine, I will take Daphne Greengrass." Asheniert continued. "Or I can do her." He said pointing at Hermione.

"Greengrass would be better with him." Nott said pointing at Dean.

"What?" Dean objected. "I don't want her."

"Stop, this is not happening." Hermione said. "You cannot make these decisions for other people."

"You off all people shouldn't object, darling." Malfoy said.

Hermione's eyes widened.

"Oh, you haven't told them yet." Malfoy said with his famous smirk.

"Told us what?" Harry demanded.

"Granger here has already made a bargain to do her bit." Malfoy said.

"With who?" Harry asked.

"With me." Malfoy said.

The collective gasp in the room. Hermione wanted the world to swallow her up. This was going very badly. She had been struggling for a way to break the news to people, or maybe keep it a secret. But the secret was out now.

"And the point is that it was something I agreed to, not something you could decide for me." She said, but the look she got from Malfoy said that he knew that wasn't entirely true.

"Moine?" Ron said like a hurt five year old.

She couldn't believe that Malfoy had done this to her. Just as she was starting to think he was alright, he went and did this to her.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

The meeting devolved into shouting and it quickly broke up.

The two Ravenclaws left as well, leaving everyone else in silence. Harry was staring at her like he realised he didn't know her at all.

"Could you all leave." Harry said. "I need to talk to Mione for a second. You too, Ron."

Everyone walked out of the pub, leaving her and Harry by themselves.

"What could possibly have been going through your mind?" Harry asked. "Malfoy?"

"I felt it was necessary for the benefit of this society." She said. "To get rid of this pureblood, muggleborn distinction. If we can have a future without it, we would all be better off."

"But Malfoy. I don't buy it." Harry said. "Malfoy and his attitude doesn't matter Mione, it never did. Certainly not something worth whoring yourself out for."

"I'm not whoring myself and it hurts that you would say so."

"Are you sleeping with him?"

"Yes."

Harry brought his hands up and pulled on his hair. He seemed completely lost for words.

"You don't have to go back, Mione." Harry said. "Just don't go back."

"I made an agreement. And he hasn't been awful, quite considerate. Until just now."

"No, I don't buy it." Harry said. "You hate him. You would never agree to this. He must have done something to you."

"Harry..." she started wanting to point out the ridiculousness of what he was saying.

"The assault on the castle." Harry said. "It's why they helped us. You made an agreement with him."

Hermione was astounded how astute Harry was sometimes.

"This is all my fault." Harry said looking like he wanted to throw up.

"No Harry. I'm a big girl, I know exactly what I was getting into. I firmly believe this is for the best. He would have helped anyway, he said so." She left out the little fact that he had only revealed this fact after she'd agreed.

"Malfoy is right about our population issues, as much as I hate to admit it. We are in real peril of extinction, particularly if the Slytherins continue to inbreed." She continued.

"I thought you objected to a more organised approach."

"I don't agree with girls being treated like trading cards. Each of us has to make a decision to do what we feel is best. I have decided to, but it was my decision."

"We can undo this Mione. I don't care what it takes, I don't care if it destroys everything."

"No Harry, I want to do this. We will have a child and then we will part. It's not that bad really. It's just sex. It's not like I'm getting emotionally involved."

"I don't like it."

"Its not for you to like, Harry. It is my decision and I've made it. Just trust me Harry."

"I trust you, I just don't trust him."

"I am hardly going to let him mistreat me." She said. "And I really need to have a few words to him about discretion."

"I'm so sorry." Harry said and pulled her into a bear hug. They hugged for a while. "Do you really think this thing could come back and kill us?"

"I don't know. It is possible, but I hope not." She said.

"Maybe we are better off not bringing more children into this world." Harry said.

"It would mean the end of the magical world."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" Harry asked.

"I'm not ready for extinction yet. And obviously, I will go to extremes to ensure that."

She walked back to the castle with Harry. She did her best to assure him that she was alright, before excusing herself to go do some work. She didn't go do some work, however, she floo'd over to Malfoy Manor.

She found him in the study.

"That was completely unnecessary!" She shouted at him.

"How was I supposed to know you hadn't told anyone." He said looking up from the desk. "What were you intention, that you could keep this marriage a secret? It was going to be obvious when your belly starts swelling."

"Its my business when I tell my friends." She demanded.

"I am not going to be hidden like a dirty little secret." He said. "And I am not putting up with wankers like Asheniert thinking he can get it on with my wife."

"Well, you still should not have taken it upon yourself to tell everyone so bluntly."

"I can tell whoever I want about my marriage." He said. "And I am not responsible for you being chicken about telling your friends. Face it, the best way to do it is rip it quickly like Greentree slug goo, you save yourself a lot of pain by getting it over with upfront rather than trying to pry it off slowly."

"You cause me a bit of grief."

"No, you did that all on your own." He said.

Hermione huffed. Technically his statement was logical, but he was still inconsiderate.

"As you are here." He said. "Would you spit into this." He said holding out a vial with some powder in it."

"What is it?" She said.

"It is a special potion that will detect the presence of a Malfoy babe."

"Only a Malfoy?" She said, her curiosity winning out over any other reaction.

"Yes." He said. "A family recipe that has been around since the Middle ages. It is very effective."

"It must be quite advanced to pinpoint a specific family."

"Of course its advanced. What family did you think you were marrying into?" He said. "Now spit."

She thought about defying him just for the fact that he was ordering her, but that would be illogical so she spit into the vial.

He shook it around for a while.

"You're not pregnant yet." He said. "Nevermind, early days. Its only been a few days, you might not even be fertile yet. I guess we will just have to keep trying. No time like the present. Get your kit off." His hands going for his belt.

"No." Hermione stated. "I have work to do. I am not a lap dog that comes at your command. I agreed that I will spend the nights with you. And its still light out." She turned and marched out the door.

She heard him laughing behind her. "See you tonight Granger. I'll be waiting."

She floo'd back to Hogwarts, still flushed with embarrassment. She wondered if he had been joking, or if he was prepared to have sex with her there on the floor of his study. She considered the idea that he was toying with her, with her embarrassment. Well, it worked.

She returned to her vermin problem in the bowls of the castle, trying not to think of the fact that she would be returning there in a few hours. Where he would be prying off her clothes and doing things to her. Warm, sweaty things, with a lot of moaning and groaning. And the inescapable tension with its threat to drag her under and consumer her.

She felt tingles up her spine and it made the spell go wrong. She shook her wand and tried to get rid of the feeling. When did it get so warm down here, no wonder these vines were taking over the castle.

She felt increasingly nervous as it was getting closer to dinner time. She did every night, but somehow it was only nervous tonight, the fear was gone. She wasn't sure why or how, but the fear was gone. She didn't even fear the drowning sensation, she was actually quite

curious about it. Not that she'd admit it, it suited her just fine to think she hated the sensations of him being inside her.

And it made her blush to think that he wanted to be inside her. She had never been confronted with such before, at least not in a real and tangible way. She didn't know what it meant.

She actually departed for Malfoy Manor quite late that night. She wasn't sure why, but she could think of all these things she could do, and they would all just take a little bit of time until in added up to a fair bit of time.

"Sorry, I am late." She said when she finally arrived. He had eaten.

"You missed dinner." He said. "Have you eaten?"

She shook her head. She was famished and not hungry at the same time.

"Eat." He ordered. She sat down at the table. She knew she needed to eat, so she forced herself.

He was quiet that evening and she was grateful. He was watching her and it made her stomach clench up.

"I can't eat any more." She admitted.

"Then come."

Her stomach clenched even more. There might be something wrong with her, she wondered if she was running a slight fever. Everything was a tiny bit out of kilter. Her skin seemed to vibrate when he touched her. And he kissed her, a kiss she felt down to her toes.

Her body seemed to welcome the sensation of being near him tonight. Heat crept up her spine and she wanted him closer. She could hear his breath getting heavy as he pressed down on top of her. She could feel his erection between her legs.

It was astounding in her mind that a boy wanted her like this. It was obvious that he did and she had this impact on him. This was causing some serious rewriting about her identity and what it was that she was.

He seemed a little less co-ordinated tonight. Less teasing, less kissing, more focused on the friction between their bodies. His hand was on her back side pressing her hips too him. They weren't even undressed yet, normally he would have had her out of her shirt and bra by now.

Her hand snuck up inside his shirt. His skin was very warm and she felt that she needed to touch it.

He pulled back from her and roughly tugged off his shirt and hers. No where near the smooth declothing he'd managed before. She realised he has less control, and she was responsible. She had done this to him and it made her feel immensely powerful.

He didn't bother taking her skirt off, it was pooled around her waist as he was entering her. The tension was much higher and all encompassing as he sunk into her. It took her breath away, and it only grew with each stroke. His mouth was just above hers and she felt his ragged breaths on the sensitive skin of her lips.

She was going under, she couldn't breath and it felt glorious. Maybe it was the oxygen starvation that made this tension feel so good. He ground his hips to her and something changed, a shift that made her insides explode. She wasn't sure what it was, but she seemed to lose consciousness.

He was straining above her when she regained consciousness from the pulsing abyss. She was in desperate need of oxygen and was taking huge shuddering breaths to make up for it. It took her a whole minute to realise what had happened. She'd had an orgasm, she had read all about them in Cosmo last summer. She could hit herself for not realising what it was, it was so obvious now. It just hadn't felt like she thought it would. It had been much...wilder.

"I always knew there was fire behind that prizzy front." He said lying exhausted on top of her.

She lay there underneath his weight trying to think what this meant. She wondered if she was a sex kitten. It was obviously something Cosmo supported whole heartedly. She wished she still had those magazines. She remembered there was a test in one of them. Surely one orgasm didn't a sex kitten make, she thought, but what had just happened felt quite monumental.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

They were planning their response to a potential werewolf attack a couple of days later. The Slytherins came to Lupin's office, late as expected. It was a tense meeting. Nott did most of the talking from the Slytherins' end.

They clearly didn't agree on some tactics. They had some pretty different ideas on how to fight. While Lupin tried to marry the two methods into something that would be advantageous.

They finally agreed on some points of the strategy, but it was apparent that everyone'd had enough for one day.

"We also need Sharon Jamieson." Nott said.

There was quiet in the group. Everyone was now well aware of the Slytherin's selective breeding programme, but it was a topic that had been largely un-discussed as a group.

There was a bit of fidgeting and an uncomfortable silence.

"She's not with anyone." Dean Thomas said. Silence continued.

"We will pass on your proposal." Lupin finally interrupted. "Who is the match?"

"Goyle."

"Urgh." Ron said with a shudder. "I don't think either of them should breed."

"Ron!" Hermione said.

"I'm just saying." Ron said.

"You shouldn't judge people on something they have no control over." She chided him because he was obviously remarking on the fact that Sharon was no spectacular beauty. And Goyle was...Goyle.

"And we need some of our girls to find matches here." Nott continued.

"Piss off." Ron said. "They're bitches. Although, I have already done my part haven't I."

"If anyone makes an offer for one of them, we'll let you know." Harry said.

"They should be here, so they can mingle." Nott continued.

Even Hermione raised her eyebrows at the ridiculous proposition. Slytherin girls didn't mingle, they would be a complete drag on the castle with their bitchiness and sniping. She was pretty sure no one wanted them here.

"We can't afford to feed them." Harry said.

"We will provide the extra food then." Nott said between his teeth.

"That's settled then." Lupin said. "The Slytherin girls will move back into the Slytherin quarters. Now meeting adjourned." He said before anyone had time to argue. The Slytherins marched out the second the meeting was over, and Lupin retreated into his inner sanctum.

"Pansy isn't going to be happy." Ron said. "And how did we end up agreeing with them fobbing Millicent Bulstode off on us? I would have thought Millicent and Goyle would have made a great match, how about Crabbe?"

"A bit of integration won't necessarily be a bad thing." Hermione said, trying to put a positive spin on it.

"I wonder if they'll send Greengrass over." Dean said. "Although it sounded like Zabini had a bit of a thing for her."

"Guess he just couldn't bare breeding for the greater good." Harry said.

Hermione watched a spot out of the window as she let the uncomfortable moment pass. She didn't want to explore what people thought of her agreement. She knew she would see it if she looked in their eyes.

"Although who would have thought that the school's administration would encourage us to get hot and heavy with as many girls as possible." Dean said. "There is something to be said for this brave new world."

It seemed to lighten the mood amongst the boys, although Hermione was embarrassed.

"If my life depended on it, I could probably manage to give Tracey Davis one." Dean continued.

She wanted to tell them off, but she didn't want to open herself up for comments about what Malfoy was giving her each night. Their sweaty, groany nightly activities. While it had morphed into something that was far from uncomfortable of late, she was still mortifyingly embarrassed about it. It was deeply uncomfortable realising that pretty much everyone knew what they were doing. Even more so that she actually liked it.

She arrived at Malfoy manor shortly after dark. She actually didn't mind going there, it meant that there was a period where no one could chase her down to solve some problem for them. They ate their dinner in silence.

"Was the proposal put to Sharon Jamieson?" He finally asked.

"I don't know. Lupin would have done it." She said, still feeling uncomfortable about the whole thing.

"Can you ask her tomorrow?" He asked her. He was finished and leaned back in his chair with his wine, watching her finish eating. Hermione couldn't drink wine, she didn't like the taste of it, but he had grown up with it.

Hermione didn't say anything for a moment. "Wouldn't it be better if these things just happened naturally?"

"Naturally brought us to the situation we are in."

"The problem you are in was brought on by strict social conventions. I'm not sure that was the natural I was talking about."

He got up and walked towards his drinks cabinet to pour himself something more substantial like he sometimes seemed to do after dinner. He was so entrenched in his conventions, she realised. He was still holding onto many of the things he did before things changed. Things that he was expected to do.

"So what do you expect, Granger?" He asked. "Don't tell me you expect us to all fall in love?" He said with a laugh.

"What is wrong with that?"

"First of all, we don't have time for attractions to grow naturally, and more to the point, love is an illusion."

"You don't believe in love?"

He snorted. "Love is a concept we made up to get you to spread your legs for us."

"And brutally put."

"I am just being honest. You marry and breed for the benefit of your family. Love, is for getting weak girls to put out. And it remarkably effective, girls fall for it every time. You'd think they would click on, but no."

"That is a pretty stark way of looking at relationships."

"It is the way things are." He said as he sat down in his chair again. She searched his grey eyes and she knew it was the truth according to him.

"What about your wife?"

"Are you asking if I love you?" He said with a smirk. "Wives are duty and family. It is duty to do what is best for the family, that includes the wife."

"Does that include fidelity?" She asked.

"It certainly does on the part of the wife."

"Wow." Hermione said, finally seeing the harshness of the pureblood way of life. The fact that the fidelity requirement was only on the wife did not escape her. How completely hypocritical. A wife was a commodity and other girls were commodities in another context.

"I'm not sure you could further minimise human value if you tried." She said. I truly don't like pureblood society, she thought. She had never really put a finger on why before. It had no value on human life and relationships.

Draco crooked his head like he didn't understand.

Sadly, on the logical sense, it only confirmed the necessity of breaking up the pureblood society. The world would be seriously better off if the pureblood values were diluted. Although on a personal respect, she was a little concerned about her potential child, but fundamentally she knew she was strong enough to ensure she could combat the archaic pureblood values. This child would after all, not be a pureblood.

Having spent all her life justifying how similar they were, he never seemed more foreign. They truly were very different. He had grown

up in this cold society, which did its very best to turn him into one of its members. Not that he ever fought it. She wasn't sure how she felt. It wasn't like she was in love with him and she certainly wasn't hankering for him to be in love with her.

Perversely, it didn't seem to bother her when he touched her. The sex seemed to be even more intimate that night. They were chest to chest tonight. As close as she had ever been to another person. Maybe because those few moments where control seemed to slip was the only point of intimacy going. The only point of naturalness in an existence that was restrained and controlled in every possible way.

She felt sorry for him, but at the same time, she felt contempt for him keeping to the expectations. Which in a way he wasn't, as he was currently physically embedded in a mudblood. She was very confused, which had to be put aside because she was coming. His arms came around and held her even close when she arched up as the sensations were overwhelming her.

When it passed, they were so entwined it was a struggle to separate. Her confusion returned, how can someone do that and feel nothing for the other person. It was impossible, you had to expose your soul a little in order to be that intimate with someone. She certainly wasn't in love, but there was some level of acceptance of him to do what they'd just done. Not that she accepted his views on things, but she did accept him as a person.

He was lying beside her recovering his breath. She was still embarrassed by his nakedness. At the same time, she was learning to appreciate it because he was absolutely beautiful. Nakedness was something else they shared, something she had never shared with anyone else.

She sat up and cleaned the mess after. He got up as well and dressed. They could not sleep naked together, it just got too hot.

"Spit." He said holding out a vial to her. She complied and continued putting on her night clothes.

"Merlin." He said behind her. "Its done. You're pregnant." There was a pause. "That was amazingly quick. You are amazingly fertile."

Hermione froze as she was trying to absorb the news.

"Well done." He said, and after a moment of stunned silence, he seemed to want to do something but couldn't make up his mind. He finally held out his hand. She shook it. "Guess its done."

"We're going to be parents." She said trying to get her brain to work.

"That was the objective." He said.

Hermione didn't know what to say or do. She was not ready to sleep and she felt an overwhelming need to be alone to absorb the implications. In nine months, she was going to have a baby.

"I'm going to go." She said. Desperately wanting a bath in the prefects bathroom to consider what she had just learned.

"Yeah," he said with a slightly dumb-stuck expression, "I guess we are done here."

She dressed quickly.

"I guess I will see you around." She said as she looked at the door.

"Yeah, see you." He said.

She looked around the room quickly, before stepped towards the door. She wouldn't be coming back here tomorrow, she knew.

"I hope I don't have to warn you not to do any stupid things, like put yourself in danger." He said. "You are carrying precious cargo."

She wasn't sure whether he was joking, she just wasn't in the mood to look at anything humorous at the moment. She just nodded and left.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Hermione felt stunned the next day. It was surreal to think she had a baby growing inside her belly. Other than the dumbstruck state of mind, she didn't feel any different. She wasn't quite sure what emotion she was feeling at the thought of her belly getting big. It just felt alien.

And then there was the whole thing about her having a baby with Malfoy, which was a mind bender any way you looked at it.

There was only one thing to do, consult the library. Which turned out quite unhelpful. Pregnancy can affect your magical abilities, and occasionally babies inside can result in spontaneously magic around the mother. Other than that, the magical community knew little about babies. They came out after 40 weeks or so. There was a great deal of magic dedicated over the centuries to influence the gender of the child and there were certain kinds of magics that were discouraged during pregnancy. That was pretty much the sum of it.

There was nothing about things you were supposed or not supposed to do. The muggles had a whole industry dedicated to this. Vitamins you were supposed to take, food you were supposed to avoid. Exercise you should or shouldn't do. Types of music you should be playing. All sorts of rules. She'd never paid attention, but now she didn't know what food she was supposed to avoid or the things she was supposed to do for the benefit of the baby. The book in the library said nothing about this.

She occupied herself with the boring things that needed to be done to keep the castle running. The arrival of the Slytherin girls caused quite a commotion. There seemed to be some kind of clash between Pansy and the Slytherin girls. Pansy was living with Ron in one of the second floor classrooms, so she wasn't in the Slytherin quarters.

Sharon was absolutely adamant that she would not accept Goyle, and who could blame her really. As it turned out Sharon had a huge crush on one of the Ravenclaw boys, and not even Lupin's pep talk would get her to re-consider Goyle's offer. And Hermione was pretty sure that Goyle wasn't all that excited about the match either.

It felt strange to retreat back to her own bed at the end of the day. She was still in the Gryffindor dorm with some of the other girls. Although some like Ginny had move in with their boyfriends in some nook or cranny around the castle.

She couldn't sleep and she kept on thinking about Malfoy, the father of her child. And her lover. Lover no more. A lover who did not believe in love. She wondered if that was true. She also wasn't sure how she felt about that, about him.

She was exhausted at breakfast the next day.

"I can't believe those bitches are here." Pansy said as she sat down on the bench.

"They giving you a hard time Pans?" Ginny said.

"Yeah, calling me a traitor, like the old world is even relevant anymore. So immature. They're just jealous because I've found a great guy and they have wholesale been rejected." Pansy vented.

"It doesn't matter baby, they don't matter." Ron said.

"You're right. It just rubs me the wrong way. Are you playing quidditch after breakfast?" Pansy changed the subject.

"We're going right now." Ron said. "Better run. See you later." He said with a kiss before most of the table occupants left, leaving Hermione with Pansy. They hadn't spoken much since she and Ron became a couple.

"So, you've been with Draco." Pansy said. Hermione didn't know how this conversation was going to go, considering that Pansy was Malfoy's ex.

"Umhm." Hermione said and nibbled on her oats.

"But you're not living over there?"

"No." Hermione said. "Not anymore."

"Are you...?"

Hermione nodded.

"Congratulations." Pansy said without sarcasm. "Draco must be happy."

"A little stunned I think."

"I can imagine." Pansy said and Hermione felt the girl studying her.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Hermione was actually dying to talk to someone about it, but felt unsure that this was the right person to do so with. Although there wasn't any other right people either.

"You were together for a while." Hermione finally said tentatively, trying to break the ice.

"For about two years." Pansy said. "But it ran its course and, you know, Draco is Draco."

Hermione didn't quite know. "Did you have a falling out?"

"We were just different." Pansy said with a sigh, "And even though I care for him, we were just not compatible."

"He said he doesn't believe in love." Hermione said.

"He doesn't." Pansy said. "It's the Slytherin view of the world and many of them say it, but Draco does believe it."

"How can you not believe in love?"

"It's just not in his view of the world." Pansy said. "He is complicated. Ron is so easy in comparison, Ron just wants to be loved and that is all. Draco, on the other hand, is a whole different kettle of fish. There are so many things that are tied up in his identity and his sense of being."

"What do you mean?" Hermione said.

"Draco is domineering." Pansy said. "And it's more than being a Slytherin. It's something inside him. You didn't know."

"I don't understand." Hermione said.

"That's because Draco has been on his best behaviour." Pansy said with a laugh. "He didn't show you his true nature."

"Which is what?" Hermione said, confusion reigning inside her head.

"Like I said, he is domineering." Pansy said. "Sexually domineering, relationship domineering. And it's more than just him being a Slytherin and a Malfoy, it's something in him, something he needs."

"I don't understand." Hermione said again.

"He needs to control." Pansy said. "Him on top, making decisions, you on the bottom being submissive."

Hermione made a dismissive chuckle.

"So he didn't tie you up?"

"What? No!" Hermione said defensively. Like she would accept being treated in that way. "Did he do that to you?"

"Yes."

Hermione was shocked. She wasn't sure what she believed. She had never seen any such behaviour from him. Maybe Pansy was just stirring. There was always the possibility that she was just trying to sabotage things. Not that there was anything to sabotage anymore. They were not together. Technically they were, but the purpose of their union had been completed. And once the child was born, the official part of their union would end as well.

"Don't get me wrong." Pansy continued. "He isn't a bad person, he just needs his relationships to have this domineering tilt to it. And if you can't deal with that, you shouldn't get involved with him. I'd have thought you'd given this a bit of consideration before getting involved with him."

"I didn't know." Hermione said. "And I didn't really get a chance to consider anything. He forced me into this relationship."

Pansy laughed. "That's so Draco."

"I'm glad you find that funny." Hermione said.

"I guess from your perspective it wouldn't be." She said. "But seriously, if you are thinking about any further involvement with him, you need to accept this part of him. I wouldn't work to ask him to repress something that is so central to his being and you need to know what you're getting yourself into."

"A sexual deviant who doesn't believe in love." Hermione said. "It sounds so appealing, I'm not sure I can restrain myself." She said with sarcasm.

"Well, you can't have Ron. He is taken." Pansy said. "I know lots of people don't approve, maybe even you, but I love Ron. And I love that it is a simple and straight forward relationship. What you see is what you get. After Draco, it is ... simple. I really, really hope Draco

finds someone that suits him, someone who will accept him as he is."

You mean demented, Hermione said to herself. Pansy got up and left, leaving Hermione to consider the conversation they'd just had. It was a conversation that shifted Hermione's accepted view of the world. The thing she'd had with Draco hadn't been real in every respect. She didn't know if it had been real in any respect. Well in some it had, like they'd had sex.

But she had never picked up on these traits in him, but as she sat there and thought about it, signs had been there. He liked to undress her. He liked to constrain her by holding her wrists over her head. Just subtle little signs. But Pansy was right, unless she was telling complete porkies, that he had been on his best behaviour, not revealing some of these things about himself.

Because he wasn't in this for a relationship. He was in it for a baby. She wasn't sure why she felt hurt, it wasn't like she was in it for a relationship either. It just astonished her that she could have slept with someone for a stretch of time and not realise this about him. It was disturbing to think that someone was hiding a part of themselves. It made her wonder what people hid from each other. Were there things about Harry that she didn't know. Sex was a subject they never thought about, and she knew logically that there was a whole part of him that she didn't know and that he never revealed. What about all the other boys, what about Lupin. That was just creepy.

Well, Malfoy had just labelled himself as a reject. Someone not right. And Pansy had dumped him because of it. Maybe he was damaged in some way, his upbringing the likely cause. How could anyone normal come out of a family like that?

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Hermione was furious. She woke up furious in the morning and it just stayed. She almost dared people to bother her so she could give them a piece of her mind, but somehow they all seemed to pick up on this.

How dare someone be involved with you and then turn out to be defective. That shouldn't be allowed. And she'd been with someone who...god knows what. She actually had no idea but knew it was wrong. Domineering meant inequality and he was all about that. Is that why he picked her, because he thought he was better than her. He certainly had never made any attempts to hide that.

She felt so betrayed. And now she was having a baby with him. What if the baby was just like him, what if there was nothing of her in the baby and it was just a repugnant little replica of him. Could she even love it if it were?

She tracked down Pansy after breakfast.

"What do you mean domineering?" She demanded. "What does that mean?"

"He likes to have his way." Pansy said a little taken aback at being accosted.

"Who doesn't like having their way?" Hermione asked.

"Most people do, I guess." Pansy said. "Its hard to explain. He is very traditional, he likes the man to be in charge and the woman to be a woman."

"To be a woman?" Hermione asked. "Its not something you chose to be, you just are by nature of gender. What, he wants a girl to defer to

his will?"

"Yes."

"That's ridiculous." Hermione said. "To just let him do whatever he wants and not complain about anything that is? Sounds like he wants to have his cake and eat it too. Nobody will put up with that and he is stupid to think anyone would. Seriously, if he thinks I am stupid enough to put up with that, he's crazy."

"It's more complicated than that." Pansy said.

"I might be pregnant, but I'm not barefoot! And I never will be!" Hermione yelled and walked away.

Pansy looked down at her feet. "How is footwear relevant?" She asked to Hermione's retreating back.

Hermione spent a couple of hours cleaning a nest of Gnuckles with unusual viciousness. After she'd exhausted herself, she retreated to the Prefects bathroom for some quality time with a tub full of hot water.

As she sat and soaked, she realised that she was being ridiculous. It didn't matter what he was like or what he liked to do, they were having a baby and that was the full extent of their relationship. There was no reason for her to be this angry because of how he liked to run his relationships. It was the principle of the thing, a part of her mind justified. And then another part told her that she should give up trying to instil principles in Draco Malfoy and his ilk. But on the other hand, this was the father of her child, who would to some degree raise this child, and it was not acceptable that he do so with ideas that were completely mental.

No it was definitely time to think rationally about this. It didn't matter. Whatever kind of sexscapades he liked to engage with, it was none of her business. If need be he would learn the hard way that he couldn't control her. He was beyond stupid to think he ever could.

She managed to calm down and she talked herself into calmness throughout the next few days. She still didn't feel pregnant. Maybe Malfoy's little test was untrustworthy. It didn't matter either way, she wasn't going over and spending the nights with him, which was good. God knows what he wanted to do to her. She didn't think she could go to bed with him now that she knew there were probably some sick and kinky things going on in his mind.

She saw him a few days later. The Slytherins attended a planning meeting. He was standing on the other side of the room leaning against a desk. Wearing black like he usually did. She actually preferred the lighter colours on him, the black was too stark with his fair hair and skin.

He made eye contact with her and she huffed and looked away. She did notice that he raised his eyebrows a bit before returning his attention to the conversation as Harry was laying out battle tactics for a potential werewolf invasion.

Hermione looked back slyly. He's shoes were polished. She wondered who had polished them, she was pretty sure it wasn't him. Maybe the little elf. Maybe one of the muggle girls. She wondered if he was sleeping with one of them. A flash of anger ripped through her.

No, she chided herself. It was none of her business how he treated people and she really needs to stop watching him, particularly as her eyes were travelling up his legs which looked quite nice in those pants. Much nicer than he deserved. She can't believe she'd slept with him. It was actually more surreal now than it was before she'd done it.

And he was defective. It was such a shame, but then why was she surprised. A pureblood supremacist like him was bound to be a few sandwiches short of a picnic. They were all in this situation because they had been inbred to the point of practical mental retardation. And obviously it ran deep.

She didn't really hear much of what Harry was saying, she was too distracted. She wondered if it was 'baby brain' like her mother had always said whenever the pregnant receptionist at the practice did something astoundingly stupid.

She could feel his eyes on her and she felt herself heat up with embarrassment or even indignation, she wasn't quite sure which.

As soon as Harry declared the meeting over, Hermione rushed out of the room, past Malfoy who hadn't moved an inch and was watching her casually with his arms crossed over his stomach.

She had a strange dream that night. She was a flamenco dancer like the one she'd seen in Spain with her parents. She was dancing in a restaurant and everyone was watching her, and he was there, and he was watching her. And she knew he was watching her as she did her steps. She couldn't quite see him due to the lights, but she knew without a doubt that he was there. Watching.

She shook her head to get rid of the silly dream when she woke up. That was probably one of the strangest dreams she'd ever had. Probably one a psychologist would think was very meaningful or some such bullshit.

She was pretty sure she was supposed to have strange dreams because of the pregnancy. She scrubbed things to within an inch of their lives the next few days.

She had the same dream a few nights later. She was wearing a different dress, but the dream was in essence the same. Oh great, recurrent dancing dreams, she thought. Although I am pretty good at flamenco in the dreams, who would have thought, she mused.

A few nights later, Hermione was getting ready for bed and had drawn the curtain around her bed so she could read in privacy. Although she was more often too tired to read in the evenings now.

"He is such a bastard." She heard Parvati whining to Lavender. "He thinks he can just treat me any way he wants."

"So why not just dump him." Lavender said.

"Because..."

"Because, you're in love with him."

"No I'm not!" Parvati said.

"Really? Do you think about him obsessively? To the point where you're too distracted to do what you're supposed to be doing?"

Parvati snorted.

"Do you watch him anytime he is around?"

Parvati snorted again.

"Where is the real teller. Do you dream about him?"

Hermione sat up in her bed. She felt like her heart had stopped and she couldn't get any air.

"Face it." Lavender continued. "You're in love with him."

"What am I going to do?" Parvati whined again.

What am I going to do, Hermione asked herself. She couldn't even entertain the idea what she was in love with Malfoy. It was beyond ridiculous, and there were plenty of other explanations for where her mind had been at. She was pregnant after all, it was supposed to make you mental.

Her being in love with Malfoy was outside of all possibilities. And it was ridiculous that anyone would even suggest that, even if it was Lavender with her Witch Weekly "Are you in Love?" quiz which everyone knew was complete bollocks anyway.

But then, she had to admit that her thoughts had been completely irrational of late, thinking about him was in and of itself irrational. Love was supposed to be irrational. The only possible conclusion as logic dictated was that she was in love. An irrational state.

She started to tear up with the unfairness of it all. Why did this have to happen to her?

"You just have to realise that he is not as perfect as he makes out." Lavender was consoling Parvati. "And he can sometimes be a bit of a wanker, you just have to notice when he is and you'll get over him. You deserve someone perfect."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Really, a few moment of him being a wanker and you'll get over it? What about him being a complete degenerate loser with perhaps a rare moment of not being a wanker, will you get over it then, she thought with anger. How could this have happened? She was the most rational and logical creature on earth, someone who knows to stay as far away from Malfoy as was humanly possible. Just a little harmless baby, she thought, I would be in complete control of the whole thing. Just a quick wham, bam, thank you man. She felt anything but in control at the moment. She had just fallen in love with the most inappropriate person on the planet. And considering the Great Incident, that was possibly a factually true statement.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Hermione's little discovery wasn't going away, it was sitting on her like a weight. She was conscious of it continually. She had somehow fallen in love with Draco Malfoy and now she could basically charge him rent for the amount of time he was spending in her head. She made valiant efforts to think of other things but it crept on in. She understood why love was referred to as madness because it really was. It wasn't as if she particularly liked him, how could this happen?

And to make it all worse, she was constantly nauseous. The newest Malfoy was making its presence known. She was unsure how she felt about this little being growing inside of her. It was just a lump of cells at this point and just too bizarre to think it would grow into a walking talking person. A Malfoy no less. And on one level, it wasn't a bad thing to be able to say to this person that she had been very much in love with his or her father when they were conceived.

Now she now had to work through these unwanted feelings and shed them. Draco Malfoy was not the person she should be in love with. Not just the fact that he wasn't right, he was also Malfoy, the poster boy for everything she rejected. Alright so maybe things were a little different now, but there was lots of things that they stood for that was wrong.

She got a note from him saying that she should let him know if there was anything she needed. It was sweet and it made her angry because it was sweet. She felt the slight indentation of his writing on the parchment. It was expensive ink with crisp, shiny deep black strokes. He had beautiful handwriting. Why did everything about him have to be so beautiful?

She could imagine his hands on the parchment. He touched this. He was the only person to touch this before she got it. It held the faintest trace of his scent. She smelled the paper while at the same time revelling in how ridiculous she was. But she couldn't help it.

Everyone in the castle knew she was pregnant and knew that Malfoy was the father. No one really bothered her about it, to her eternal relief. Ron took it the worst, he refused to speak to her. He could just grow up, she said to herself. This was necessary for the future, although her stupid knee buckling 'in-loveness' was not strictly necessary, it wasn't even helpful.

She just had to accept that there was a part of her that wasn't all about cool rationality, there was something in her that was strictly irrational and it was having its time in the sun. She could accept that. She was in this manic state of irrationality and chemistry induced... euphoria linked to the idea of a certain person. It would pass.

Night-time was the worst, she kind of dreaded it, because her thoughts and her memories would not leave her alone. And there was precious little to distract her away, when she was lying in bed trying to get to sleep. She wanted him. She knew it was hormones, but they were pushing her to get up and floo over to him for a spot of relief from this constant torment. Not that she did, she was a rational creature after all, hormones were not going to rule her.

She was lying in bed again, her fingers itching to touch his warm skin. So much she almost needed to bite her fingers to distract herself. A boom reverberated through the walls and she sat up in bed. Others did too and then the alarm went. They were under siege. She scrambled to get her clothes on.

Harry was down in the courtyard giving directions.

"They're working through our defences." Harry said loudly. "It's only a matter of time. We will have to fight. Take your positions. We have trained for this, you know what to do."

Hermione's job was to support the covered bridge so they couldn't come at them from the back as well. It was obviously their plans because she could see them trying to break the wards. There was nothing to do but to wait. Only a few of them were trying to break the wards, the others were just waiting, must be muggle werewolves that didn't have any magic. Although it was kind of stupid of them to point out who was magical and who wasn't. They would have to take out the magical ones first, then the muggle. Although all of them would come at them fast. There were still ridiculously strong even without magic, but there were easier to fight with magic.

She couldn't hear what was going on at the main entrance. It was nerve wrecking standing here waiting. But she didn't have to wait for they already had cracks in the wards, she could see them.

"They're coming." She said to the people around her. She had Dean, Luna, some fifth years and two Slytherin girls. The tension in the group was palpable as they watched the first werewolf stick his leg through the crack in the ward.

"We pull back." Hermione said. "We'll hold them better if we have more space to work with. Dean, you take the one in the red shirt, he's magical. I will take the brown jacket. The rest of you fire at will."

"Are we supposed to kill them?" One of the Slytherin girls asked.

"I don't know." Hermione said. "Do what you want." She didn't know what else to say. They hadn't really talked about lethal force, although they were all well aware that some wanted it. She for one was hoping she didn't have to kill anyone.

There were coming, the noise of them running down the drawbridge was amplified by the design of it. The magical ones were tricky, hiding behind the non magical ones. It was the right decision to draw back, but as soon as they came out the other end they started firing hexes. There were more than two magical ones.

One of the sixth years let one of the werewolves too close and had a big slash across the abdomen from what must have been a knife or something.

The werewolves fought hard, but so did the students. The Slytherin girls were actually quite good and Dean was firing hexes like he'd done this before. The wolves were being hurled back through hexes, but they kept coming. They seemed to be impervious to pain too, which was discouraging. More powerful hexes were needed to knock them out.

Dean was engaged with the red shirted magical werewolf, but the non magical ones were flanking him. They were well prepared and trained. One of the Slytherin girls got hurt, which meant one of their best hex throwers was out. Hermione got singed on the leg by a hex, her jeans were on fire and she had to extinguish the fire before returning to the fight, but it meant they were a step closer.

There were killing hexes now dropping some of the wolves. She could see the distress of the brown jacket werewolf as she focused on her task of defeating him. He was thinking about running, she could see it in his eyes. It made her even angrier, to cause so much trouble and then turn tail and run. She hit him with a burning hex, but it missed as her arm was being yanked back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Malfoy said.

Hermione was stunned. Stunned to see him. Merlin he looked good.

"I am defending the castle obviously." She finally said once she got over how happy the irrational part of her brain was to see him.

He shot some more hexes, killing ones. "You're pregnant, you have no right to put yourself in harms way."

"What, I should just let the castle get run through?" She said. "You're not making any sense. We have to defend the castle."

"Not you, you don't." He said keeping an eye on the fight.

The guy in the brown jacket was gone when she looked back and it made the others seem to lose heart.

Dean and the Slytherin girl were pursuing them down the draw bridge, throwing hexes at them, still felling a few of them. And then it was quiet, except for the painful wails of the injured.

Dean and the Slytherin girl didn't come back and Hermione got concerned. She started running down the drawbridge. Malfoy was after her.

She had a feeling a dread in her stomach, but at the end of the draw bridge, she found Dean and the girl entwined.

"I think they're fine." Malfoy said and yanked on her elbow again.

"Leave me alone." She said.

"How am I supposed to leave you alone when you throw yourself into harms way at the first opportunity?"

"Its actually none of your business." She said.

"Oh, its my business. You are carrying my heir, anything you do to potentially harm it is very much my business."

"We were under siege. I had to defend the castle. What was I supposed to do, hide away?"

"Yes."

"You're being unreasonable."

"I'm being unreasonable?" He said. "You're pregnant. You seem to be forgetting that fact."

"I haven't forgotten, believe me, it won't let me." She said. "You can let me go now."

"No." He said. "You... argh."

"Why are you angry?"

"I thought I could trust you to be sensible." He said.

"I am the most sensible person around." She said, with the exception that she was in love with him. "If you think I would just stand by and let the castle be attacked, then maybe its time you wonder about your own sensibilities."

"You have no right to jeopardise my child." He said.

"I get that you think all things Malfoy come before all other things, but sometimes there are needs that are more pressing and more urgent than yours." She stated. She yanked her arm out, but he refused to let her. He started walking her into the castle. They were walking down a corridor, then he seemed to change his mind.

"Where are we going?" She asked. "I have to see Harry."

"He's fine." Malfoy said and kept walking them down a hallway.

After walking a minute, he seemed to change his mind again. He took her to Snape's old office and floo'd them back to his rooms.

"Stay here, or I swear to Merlin, I will chain you." He said and disappeared back into the fireplace again.

Hermione huffed. Where did he get off telling her what to do? But she knew she was not going to give him a chance to chain her up. They would talk rationally, when he returned.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Draco didn't return and it was getting light outside. As soon as the adrenalin settled, Hermione could barely keep her eyes open. Her feet were hurting, not to mention the burn on her leg. But even that pain was not taking priority over her exhaustion.

The bed was unmade, he had obviously been sleeping when he got the call that Hogwarts was under siege. The white sheets looked beyond inviting. She was only going to close her eyes for a minute.

She took off her shoes and climbed in. The smell of him completely enveloped her. In this place where they had done such intimate things. She couldn't think about it, she just had to surrender to sleep.

Consciousness returned in steps. Hearing his breathing was one of the steps. She sat up abruptly when she realised she was in his bed. He didn't wake. He was sleeping with in his pants with his shirt off. There was blood on his abdomen but no injuries. He had dirt on his face and hands. For someone so immaculately groomed, it was strange to see him dirty.

He didn't have blood on him when he left the previous night. She wondered what'd happened.

It was getting dark outside; she'd slept through most of the day. She needed to get back to the castle, she realised. She stepped out of bed, which woke him. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat for a minute seemingly disorientated from sleep.

"How long have you been back?" She asked.

"A few hours." His voice was barely a croak.

"I have to go." She said.

"Have you seen to your wound?"

"Not yet."

He got up. "Come." He said and walked to the bathroom and she followed after a moment of hesitation. He pulled out a small chest from a set of drawers in the bathroom and put it on the floor. He indicated for her to sit of the side of the bath and she did.

He cut the jeans off her lower leg. They were ruined anyway by the burn, but it felt weird to be fussed over. He proceeded to clean the wound.

"What happened after you left?" She finally said.

"We went after the rest." He said. "Greyback is dead and we went after the rest."

She felt a sense of relief to know that Greyback was dead. She didn't like the idea that she was glad that someone had been killed but it was the case.

"And the wounded have been tended." He continued.

"How many did we lose?"

"Six."

"Harry?"

"He's fine."

"Who?"

Draco named the students who died, two fourth years, the Slytherin girl who had been fighting at the drawbridge, a hufflepuff sixth year, a gryffindor fifth year and Michael Corner. Hermione absorbed the news.

Draco was smearing a lotion on her wound. It stung, but she didn't say anything.

"You should eat." He said.

"I need to get back."

"They're all asleep." He said. "There is nothing you can do. So eat and let people sleep."

She should go, but on one hand, she didn't want to see the scars of war on the castle and its inhabitants. She let him call the elf for food. It didn't take long before the smell of eggs and bacon filled the room and made her stomach churn with hunger. He was dressed in a new crisp white shirt as he sat down at the table.

"So its over?" She said hopefully.

"Yes. The werewolf incursion is over." Draco said. "We got most of them. A couple of the magical ones escaped, and some of the muggle ones. We'll track them down. The muggle ones will probably go to ground in the muggle world. I think they got the message loud and clear last night."

Hermione tried to think through the implications of what that meant beyond the intense relief that they would not be under threat anymore. She couldn't really remember a time when she had not been under threat in some form or another.

"Thank you." She said. "Thank you for coming last night."

He didn't say anything. They finished eating in silence.

"I need to go." She said, resigned that she had to return and face the unpleasantness.

He nodded and stood. "I need to check on the wounded."

She followed him to the fireplace. He insisted on going first and she gritted her teeth, a little miffed that he assumed she couldn't take care of herself if something was happening on the other side. She followed him into the hospital wing because she had to see for herself. The wing was full and she felt a lump in the throat as she walked in.

He knew exactly where who he wanted to see. Someone with a bandage on his head. She couldn't tell who it was. Draco did a few things with his wand, then moved onto another bed. It was eerie silent in the hospital wing.

"If you want to be useful, we really need those things washed." He said. "We are running out of clean linen and bandages. I need to replace some of the bandages and I haven't got much spare."

She nodded and went to deal with the massive pile of dirty and bloody cloth in one of the corners. She levitated the whole pile and left for the laundry room down in the bowls of the castle. She passed the odd person on the way, but no one was talking or engaging in any way. The eerie silence seemed to cover the entire castle. It felt like a dream.

She cleaned the linen and the bandages as fast as she could. The pile stunk of smoke and blood. It took a couple of hours to clean and dry it all. It took a little longer than it should as she made extra effort to make sure there was no contamination as this stuff would be in contact with wounds.

There were more people around as she levitated the pile back to the hospital wing. Draco was still there. He looked exhausted, but worked continuously. She respected his ability to pull through when things got tight. Someone else was there helping him. She turned to leave.

"Come by later tonight and I will redress your wound." He said as she was leaving. "Don't make me drag you because I will."

She turned to stare at him but he wasn't backing down. It was apparent that he had no intention of losing this staring contest. Finally she turned and left, but now had a mental image stuck in her head of him dragging her back to his place. An image she reacted to emotionally, but she couldn't quite work out the surge of jumbled emotions.

She found Harry walking around the outside of the castle looking at the damage.

"Mione." He said with relief when he saw her. "Malfoy said you were injured."

"Just a graze." She said. "What's the damage?"

"We lost some people." Harry said with sadness. "Greyback is dead. Some of the other werewolves too. We have some of the others looked in the tower."

"What are we going to do with them?"

Harry kicked a brick. "I don't know. Some want to kill them."

"We can't just kill them, Harry."

"What are we supposed to do, waste our energy and resources running a prison? Ask them nicely not to do it again?"

"Surely they can be rehabilitated." She said.

"You always look for the ideal outcome, Mione and I love that about you, but I'm not sure we have the resources for something like that."

"We need to give them the option." She said. "Lupin is a werewolf, he isn't unreasonable, maybe a bit creepy lately, but being a werewolf isn't a hopeless affliction."

"Maybe we should use them to work the fields for us." Harry said.

"We don't use slave labour, Harry. That is not what we are about."

Harry rubbed his nose. She could see how tired he was by how slow his eyes were moving.

"Go get some sleep, Harry. Your brain is only going to get more sluggish and we need you be at your best right now. We'll talk about it later. They are locked up tightly, sleep is top priority right now. I'll hold the fort for a few hours." She said. He nodded.

She wished she could do the same for Malfoy, but she couldn't do his job. He'd only had a few hours sleep, which was better than nothing she guessed, but he was more useful here and exhausted than sleeping.

She stayed outside the castle for hours, just watching for anything out of the ordinary so she could raise the alarm if needed. The activity in the castle started to settle down again as it got closer to midnight.

Ron surfaced and took over guard duty with a couple of others. She'd only been up for six hours, but she was tired again. She thought about going to bed, but she thought she should go back to Malfoy Manor to check on Draco. He probably would come get her if she didn't let him tend to her wound. He was probably asleep, should be asleep, but he was a stubborn prick.

He was in the shower as she got there. She was amazed he was still awake. She sat down on one of the chairs and relaxed her aching muscles. The ache in her leg intensified as she let her body relax. She listened as she could hear him showering through the door. Tried really hard to ignore the mental image of him naked with water running down him.

She cursed her stupid mind for being stupid and weak. How the hell did she get herself into this situation?

He came out wearing black pyjama pants, carrying the medicine box. He placed it down by her leg. His exhaustion was visible on him.

"I can do it myself." She said. "I think I can manage to smear a lotion and wrap a bandage."

"Fine." He said and crawled into bed. "The blue one."

She smeared it on. It smelled of herbs. She could hear by his breathing that he was asleep before she was done. She put the lotion back into the small chest when she was done and shut the lid as quietly as she could. She was unbelievably tired and wanted nothing more than to crawl into the bed too, but she had no reason to. No reason to be in his bed. It would be awkward in the morning if she was there when he woke up. She wondered for a second if she could just stay for a while and leave before he woke, but knew out of principle, the universe would never agree with such a plan.

She watched the breathing figure in the bed for a minute before she quietly left.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

Hermione kept the task of doing the hospital laundry. There wasn't anyone else to do it and she for some reason liked watching Malfoy work. Her little infatuation with him hadn't exactly worked itself through yet. But she did still have her pride, so she didn't hang around longer than necessary after finishing the laundry work.

He pulled her aside one morning and checked her wound. She was embarrassed but not quite sure why when he rolled up her leg and checked her healing skin. His hand was warm and her skin much too sensitive to it. She had to get this out of her system, it was embarrassing. She would never live it down if anyone found out.

But then he stopped coming. The injured were healing and the remaining people in the hospital wing were being cared for by Neville. She felt a great deal of disappointment when she turned up one day and he wasn't there.

"Now, I have an announcement." Lupin said. "I am sure you have all noticed, but some of the older persons residing in this castle have left already, and it is time for this school to be a school again. Hence all those who are not still engaging in studies, it is time for you to set forth into the world and rebuild our society."

"What?" Hermione said. "We're being kicked out?" There was a murmur across the entire hall.

"Most of you have family property and family businesses to return to. There are a few positions going with pay, and we have a few field labouring positions here ourselves for anyone who wants such a role. Gringotts has limited operation now under the care of Mr. Blaise Zabini, so you can access your family accounts. It is important to get the economy going again. A market has been set up in Diagon Alley

each Tuesday morning for produce, but I stress the importance of restoration of your kitchen gardens. All excess harvest is welcome at the market." Lupin said.

"Mr. Justin Finch-Fletchley's family business worked in estate sales and he has agreed to handle any sale of property or business for those of you interested in purchasing or selling. Now, I expect all of you who are no longer in studies to be taking your place in society by the end of the week. I wish you all a good evening and the very best of luck."

Lupin left the stage and a wall of chatter hit the room.

"We're going tomorrow." Ginny said taking Harry's hand.

"Going where?" Hermione asked, still gobsmacked that the world had just changed in a second.

"To Grimmauld Place, of course. Its Harry's home." Ginny said with a laugh.

"You're moving in with him?" Hermione was astounded.

"Yeah." Ginny said questioningly. "We're getting married, besides, I couldn't live with Ron and Pansy at the Burrow, that would just be creepy."

"Ron and Pansy are going to the Burrow?"

"What is the matter with you?" Ginny said. "Why is this a surprise?"

"I... it just is. Its so bizarre. I just didn't expect us to be asked to leave that's all." She said. "I didn't expect it. I have nowhere to go and I haven't got any money to draw out of Gringotts to buy food. I am pretty sure my parent's bank account is inaccessible, plus I doubt I'd get a knut for a pound from anyone."

"What do you mean you don't have any money," Seamus said.

"You're Mrs. Malfoy, you have more money than all of us put

together."

Hermione's jaw dropped from the fact that people saw her as Malfoy's wife when she had practically forgotten that fact herself. "That isn't real, Seamus."

"What do you mean it isn't real, you married the bloke and you're having his kid. I'm not sure it gets much more real than that." Seamus said and stood up.

"Why is he angry?" Hermione said as Seamus stormed off.

"Romilda Vane turned him down, taken up with a Slytherin sixth year." Ginny said.

Another issue Hermione was completely clueless about. Why was there all this stuff happening that she didn't even see coming.

"You can always move in with us." Harry said. Ginny smiled, but it was clear that she wasn't wild about the idea.

She thanked Harry for the offer and loved him for it, but she was not going to step on Ginny's toes. Well maybe, if nothing else worked out.

She sought out Lupin in his office to see if she could stay on at Hogwarts as a teacher.

"I know you would make a great teacher one day, Hermione, but you are going to be a mother before long. Child rearing is an arduous task and there is none more important. Your husband is more than well provisioned to take care of you. I realise that this marriage is not one you would see as ideal and that you perhaps have no intention of staying in it in the longer term, but with a nursing child, you will need your husband."

Hermione felt like she was being lectured and she hated it. She murmured something about having to go and left. It fully hit her how

vulnerable a woman with child was, particularly one without means. She never realised that going down this path meant limiting her options, and now it was looking like she had very few.

She just wanted to shake people and say, I can't move in with him, can't you see, I'm in love with him. Ok, that would sound weird, but when she explained that he was not the kind of person you could fall in love with, it would all make sense.

Harry and Ginny left the next day, as did Ron and Pansy. Neville was staying on as the new Herbology professor. They were all so excited about their new lives, about a world free of werewolves where they could work, shop, play. Apparently there were elections for Minister of Magic next month. Loads of people had asked Harry, but he'd said no.

Another day went by and the castle slowly changed character completely. Most of her friends were gone and everyone else she came across knew that she should be leaving.

She finally had face the fact that she didn't really have anywhere else to go, particularly nowhere where they wouldn't try to hide that her and her screaming baby was a huge imposition. She just didn't have it in her to force that on her friends. Apparently Sharon Jamieson was in the same position, but she had now organised a position at the Ministry of Magic, maintaining the floo network.

Hermione floored over to Malfoy Manor later in the evening. She looked for Malfoy in his apartment, but it wasn't his apartment anymore, just his bedroom. He had the run of the house again, his Slytherin house guests must have all move on too. How in the world was she going to find him? She eventually found him in his study.

"I had to leave Hogwarts." She said. He looked up from whatever he was doing.

"Well, there are lots of bedrooms, pick one." He said and leaned back in the chair. "Unless you were planning on staying in mine. I

have no right to deny you."

He was grinning and she fumed. He was all business in a crunch, but now'd it passed, he was back to being an arsehole.

"You don't have to make this harder than it is." She said.

"Are you're things here?"

"Yes."

"Then pick a room." He said.

"And for the record." She pointed out. "There is no concept of rights not to deny, just so we're understood."

"Technically..."

"I have no interest in hearing the rest of that statement." She cut him off. "You have no rights. Period."

"Some would say you're being unreasonable Miss Granger." He said, swivelling back and forth in the chair. He was teasing her. "Or should I say Mrs. Malfoy."

"Look, it would be an imposition for me to stay somewhere else, but I will if I have to." She warned.

"Don't worry Granger, I have no designs on you."

She turned to leave the room.

"Have you eaten?" He asked.

"I didn't have time." She said. "I'll get something."

"I'll have a plate for you here in half an hour." He said. "Seriously, do you eat if I don't make you?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and walked up the stairs. Of course she ate, mostly, when the nausea would allow. She levitated her trunk up the stairs, walked in the opposite direction of her room and stepped into a door that looked like a bedroom. The room was ridiculously big, but it would do. It was certainly big enough to have a crib in it later, as strange as that thought still was.

She felt a little miffed that he basically said he had no interest in her. She couldn't help wonder if he thought she was unattractive. He didn't seem to have a problem with her before, but maybe guys were just like that. Maybe they could do that with anything no matter how they felt or thought about them. She wondered if it was a huge mistake coming here, on top of the huge mistake of agreeing to this whole arrangement to begin with.

If she'd only had the means to purchase a property, which she didn't. Her parent's house, being in muggle London was basically out of bounds, and it was probably burnt to a shell now anyway. All those magical properties where no one now lived did belong to someone through relations, distant or otherwise. It might take some time to work it all out, but it was going to work out well for the old families. Couldn't they just hand things out fairly with people just taking an empty property as needed. It was unfair that they were going to insist on old inheritance rules, but the people without any inheritance were vastly outnumbered. She wondered how many properties Malfoy had. It was so unfair.

She returned downstairs to the study a little while later. She was hungry and slightly nauseous at the same time. But she did need to eat.

"You need to take better care of this baby." He said as she sat down in front of the plate.

"I am taking care of this baby just fine thank you." She said. "This is a natural process, the body just does it on its own, and the baby isn't going to be hurt if one of my meals is late. And I don't need to swan around making people carry things for me."

"You put yourself in harm's way."

Hermione sighed. They'd already made their thoughts on this topic known and she was too tired to fight with him.

"Fine. I promise that I won't go into battle again while I am pregnant. OK, happy now?" She said with a sting of sarcasm. "I promise I will cower in the corner, while the big strong men take care of it."

"This isn't just about you."

"Yeah, and it isn't just about you either." She said with heat.

"I just want you to try to take care of this baby while you are carrying him."

"I'm not an idiot and its my baby too." She said. "I am not going to harm this baby. I might not like you, but I am not going to take it out on my baby. This is my baby too. Really, what do you take me for? Don't answer that, I don't want to know. Now shut up, eating is hard enough without you harping on me." She said and took a bite. "And it could be a girl."

"You better hope not or you'll be spending more time in my bed."

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

It was strange being at Malfoy manor, she didn't know what to do with herself. She didn't have a job, she had nothing that she needed to care for. She was sure Hogwarts was falling apart without her. On one level she was really offended that she had been kicked out, on another she understood that the school needed to stand on its own feet in order to get itself right.

She didn't see Malfoy much, he was busy doing whatever it was he did. She tried to check out the library, but her mind was too hectic to settle down into reading, even though she longed for it.

She saw Draco for dinner in the evenings and then he typically left afterwards. It annoyed her that he left alone each evening. This wasn't working for her, she was alone in this mausoleum of a house all day long and she couldn't go on like this, but she had little option, she had nowhere else to go.

An invite from Harry and Ginny finally relieved the stretch of nothing to do. It was an invite to their house warming party. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been to a party. There hadn't been too much to celebrate, well, there was the defeat of the werewolves, but that was too traumatic for full on celebration. But a house warming party, that was so normal. Normal had been in short supply. The party was a few days away.

They ate in silence that evening, they had taken to using the dining room, which was much too large for two people. She'd be happy to eat in the kitchen, but she was pretty sure Draco didn't actually know where the kitchen was. He seemed adamant to hang onto the old ways. The little elf served dinner at 7 sharp on silverware that sparkled from polish.

She felt like it was a caricature of what life should be like in his world, while the real world was just falling apart outside. Why was he insisting on doing everything like nothing had changed?

"Nott is running for Minister of Magic." Draco said to Hermione's astonishment. It was ridiculous to think of Theo Nott as Minister, but she guessed someone had to do it. "You should vote for him."

"I should vote for Theo Nott?" She said in further astonishment. "I would purposely vote for a pureblood Slytherin who probably believes my kind should be chased out of the magical world? I suppose that would be an interesting notion. You can't be serious."

"He would serve our interests well."

"Your interests."

"Which are now your interests as well."

Hermione leaned back in her chair to study him and what he was saying because she didn't quite understand the undercurrent.

"And you know well that muggleborns have an important purpose in our society, a crucial purpose." He said.

As broodmare, she wanted to say but didn't.

"Do you expect me to support things because they are in your best interests?" She asked pointedly.

"Yes." He said. "As a wife does."

"Look, we have an arrangement, that is all." She said. "We are having a child because that is what is best for this society, then we move on. I am not wifey and I'm not going to run around after you."

"You are my wife and you will act as such in the meantime, until things change you are obliged to act in a suitable manner."

"As in not have any opinions of my own, do everything I am told?" She said heatedly. "Well you can think again, not going to happen. I am not playing house with you."

"We are not playing here." He said. "You are carrying my child and we are a family whether you like it or not. I never thought you would be unreasonable although that was probably a stupid expectation as nothing you have ever done has been reasonable."

"The world is barely functional, Draco. We are completely falling apart. You need to let go of these ridiculous expectations of yours. Having dinner served on the dot isn't going to change that."

"It's a start. Normality will resume if we insist on it."

"We are never going to be normal. You and me, we are never going to be normal, you know that right?" She said.

"We could certainly try to act normal."

"No we can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't." She said.

"I don't understand why you have to be so difficult."

"Because your version of normal isn't my version of normal, and neither of them suit me right now." She said. Because I might grow to accept it, she completed in her head. And she didn't want that. Her little infatuation meant that she was playing with a stacked deck and she couldn't trust her good judgement around him. She might do something totally daft like trade her dignity for a good kiss.

"I don't understand you." He said and left the room. She tried to rub the tension headache away but it wasn't working. How the hell did she manage to get herself into this situation? How was it even possible to be in love with someone you didn't even like? Everything

about him was revolting, his views on relationships was practically barbaric.

Hermione arrived alone at Harry's house a few days later. She never entertained the idea of bringing her 'husband' to the house warming. The house was warm and somewhat of a mess. They were obviously redecorating. The gruesome wallpaper was being torn down and the house looked a bit like a demolition site.

"You've been busy." She said when she saw Harry.

"Yeah." He said. "We've been ripping the place to pieces. Probably could have waited to have this party when it was finished, but that could be a long time away. Don't mind it, it looks worse than it is."

"What are you going to do with the Black family tapestry upstairs?"

"I haven't quite decided." He said. "I was thinking about keeping it because it was Sirius' family, but since he's been burned off it, it seems a bit contradictory. Do you think Malfoy wants it? Its his family after all."

"I will ask. He is all about family. I am sure he can find somewhere to put it."

"Good, because I kind of want to strip this place of the Blacks as much as possible."

"Can't blame you, their views of interior decorating was a bit medieval." She laughed.

He handed her a drink and then was pulled into conversation by Dean. The rooms were filling up with people. It was good to see everyone.

"Hi Hermione." Luna said. "How have you been?"

"Good."

"I hope the bump is well too."

"The bump is just fine. And it has stopped disagreeing with everything I eat, which is a nice change."

"You didn't bring your other half then."

My other half, what a way to put it. "No, he had other things to do."

Luna prattled on for about something and Hermione tuned out while absorbing the other half comment. There were so many couples in the room, Harry and Ginny, Seamus and Lavender, and then Ron and Pansy. They were hanging off each other like a couple in love. All these couples, excited about their futures together, doing stuff like setting up lives and houses. She felt cheated.

"And did you see Neville and Parvati?" Lavender said. Hermione had been too caught up to even notice Lavender joining the conversation.

"They're a couple?" She finally clicked on.

"They're both at Hogwarts, Parvati has taken on the Divinations post and familiarity definitely didn't breed contempt in this case."

Hermione wondered what her life would be like now if she and Ron had actually made a real go of it. Granted Ron drove her crazy to the point where she wanted to strangle him, but to have a real relationship with a real future, that was attractive.

She walked out to the kitchen to get herself a juice. She sat down for a minute to nurse her juice.

"How's it going?" Pansy said sitting down next to her. "He didn't come then."

"I didn't tell him about it." Hermione said.

"Ah. Probably for the best, he might have felt obliged to come. Or tried to order you not to." Pansy said. "He's not going to be happy when he finds out."

"Well its none of his business."

"I'm pretty sure he doesn't see it that way."

Hermione felt uncomfortable about the whole conversation. "How's Ron?" She said.

"He is so sweet. He tried to cook me breakfast this morning." Pansy said with a smile and Hermione wondered if she was trying to rub it in her face. Was this some kind of Slytherin girl warfare? "It was a complete disaster, but I adore him for trying."

"Cooking is not his forte." Hermione said. "He is an excellent eater though."

They sat in silence for a moment and Hermione kind of wished she would leave.

"Draco can be sweet." Pansy said almost absently.

"Really?" Hermione said not believing a word of it.

"Small things. He makes out like he is tough as nails, but most of it is a front. Well some of it, anyway." She said. "As is expected of the Malfoys. He's never going to change, you do know that right?"

Hermione only looked at her, not feeling the need to say anything.

"And you're not really one for bending much." Pansy continued. "You are fundamentally incompatible."

"Why do you care?" Hermione asked, a bit suspicious of Pansy's motives.

"I care about Draco. I don't want to see him hurt. I don't agree with this relationship and he knows that, but he insisted."

"He is interested in his heir, there is nothing more to it other than that." Hermione said. "Don't worry, he has no interest in me."

"Please." Pansy said. "He's a man, when it comes down to it, he would do anything you want him to."

"I thought you said he'd never change."

"My point is that he'd never truly be happy if you force him to."

"You make it sound like I have some kind of power over him." Hermione said. "He won't bend for anything, not even the end of civilisation. You were the one who told me he was all into the dominating a relationship, mission over love and all that."

"And he believes that to him bones. Don't ever forget that. He is a Slytherin through and through. He truly does not believe in love, but sometimes what he believes and what he feels doesn't always coincide."

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying that you might have more power over him than you think. He's been watching you for years, did you never notice?"

It was the most absurd thing she had ever heard. She snorted at the thought.

"You're talking complete bollocks." Hermione said.

"Possibly." Pansy said. "It is only my suspicion, but be careful because that black little heart of his doesn't always march to the orders of his mind. And I think you may be case in point. However, you're not good for him and you're not what he needs."

Hermione by reflect wanted to argue, but she knew they were not good for each other. He was certainly as far from a good healthy partner as one could get in her book. If she could just get over her perverse little itch to screw his brains out, that would be absolutely beyond question. Pansy insinuating that Draco having ulterior motives just made things more strange. But then Pansy wasn't entirely trustworthy.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

Hermione only saw Draco at dinner time. He was distracted much of the time, so they didn't really talk much.

"Marcus Belby got elected to Minister of Magic." Malfoy said one afternoon.

"You really didn't think Nott would get elected did you?" She said.

"He would do a better job."

"Except that a large number of people don't trust him."

"Because he's a Slytherin." Draco said. "Might be for the best, can't have him getting too up himself. But Belby, his family are thieves from way back."

"That's ridiculous." Hermione said. "And besides, his family aren't here anymore."

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Draco said. "Even that Cho Chang girl would have made a better Minister, but she's a girl, no one would have elected a girl."

"I voted for her."

"There has never been a female Minister."

"And what, she can't do the job because she's a girl?"

"Same as Nott can't do it because he's a Slytherin."

"That's different." Hermione said. "Discriminating against someone because of their gender is different from not preferring someone

because they've proven themselves to be self centred and self serving."

"In this case, its exactly the same."

"You're a pig. You are unbelievable, you know that?" Hermione said feeling anger rise up her face.

"I agree that Cho Change would likely to a better job, but this society isn't going to vote for a girl, that's just the way it is."

"Because you believe that girls should be subjugated and repressed doesn't mean that everyone does."

"Where does this come from?" Draco said. "A bit personal for a debate of societal preferences."

"I think you are applying your twisted view of the world to society in general, and it doesn't hold true."

"Well, she didn't get elected, did she?" He said. "You might not agree with it, but the outcome was predictable. You can put your head in the sand and believe that things are different, but they aren't."

"You think you're such a realist, don't you?" Hermione accused. "You revel in the wrongs of this society and do nothing to try to make things better."

"If you haven't noticed, my family has been trying to improve this society for decades."

"What, by going backwards? By supporting a lunatic like Voldemort."

"Voldemort was a curse we were sadly stuck with. We never supported his tactics or methods, but its not like you can walk away from someone like him, you're stuck whether we like it or not. Believe me, no one is more happy that he is gone than I. Why are we having this discussion?"

"I just need to know who I am dealing with."

"Well, what you see is what you get."

Silence filled the dining hall.

"I don't trust you." Hermione said.

"That is more than obvious." He said. "I have to go. Interesting discussion, but I have to leave it here." She could hear the sarcasm in his voice. He got up and left the room.

She didn't feel satisfied, in fact, she felt like she'd just scratched the surface. She wasn't entirely sure where it would lead to, but she needed to communicate her displeasure with this whole situation. Absolutely everything about it was wrong. Her being with him was wrong, her attraction to him was also wrong. She felt like she was losing sight of the person she was supposed to be.

There was a definite pouch in her belly now. She could feel it when she was lying down. The idea that there was a person growing in there was so abstract it didn't feel real. She wished she had someone she could talk to about it. Belly pouches were definitely not a topic to discuss with either Harry or Ron, and it was too personal to talk to Ginny about. Maybe Luna, but discussions with Luna always ended up somewhere completely unexpected and often a little disturbing.

And there weren't any professionals to talk to. There were no midwives, so she had to come to terms with the idea that there would be no one to help when the baby actually came. There wasn't going to be a hospital to go to, and there wasn't anyone around who had actually birthed a baby before. That was a little scary, people died in child birth, or used to all the time.

But on the upside, there was life back in Diagon Alley. Some of the shops were open while others were completely dark and shut up. There was market day once a week, not that she needed anything

as Malfoy seemed to have everything they needed food wise. But gossip was the only way to find out what was going on as there weren't any new additions of the Daily Prophet. Maybe someone should start it up again.

"Hey Harry." She said as she floo'ed over to Grimmauld Place one afternoon. "How is the refit going?"

"We're getting there. We have one room completed. Want some tea?"

She nodded and they walked into the kitchen.

"So what are you going to do?" Hermione said after a while. "Once you finish decorating. I was just thinking someone should start up the Prophet again."

"I don't think I have the makings of a journalist." Harry said. "I don't know. I'd always planned on being an auror, but the department isn't open yet. I hear that Belby is looking for some kind of law enforcement though, maybe I'll give that a shot. We still have plenty of money, so there's no rush. Dean is struggling though, he's got his parents house, but they had very little in savings."

"What's he going to do?" Hermione asked.

"He's looking for work, but there is only so much going. There are no taxes to support the Ministry growing any bigger than the handful of people who are dealing with the essential services. Apparently Belby is having tiffs with Zabini about getting money out of Gringotts. Zabini is refusing. It seems the Ministry was running a bit leanly before the Great Incident, something to do with a purchase of land for new development."

"I didn't know the Ministry was doing development."

"It was for profit, and now there is no one to sell it to. It's only partially completed and now serves no purpose what so ever."

"So we're broke?"

"Kind of." Harry confirmed. "Well, as a society we're not. Malfoy and some of the other old families have hordes of money, but communally we have very little. And some kids, particularly those tied with the muggle world have practically nothing at all. Dennis and Colin Creevey haven't got a knut or a place to live. They're living with Dean and they are all struggling."

"We have to do something." Hermione said. "We need jobs."

"We need taxes, but I suspect that the law enforcement job Belby is recruiting for is really a tax collection job. And I have to say, being a tax collector was not the job I was dreaming of."

Malfoy Mansion was quiet as per usual. The opulence of the place seemed ridiculous considering the discussion she'd just had with Harry. She walked around the house trying to think through the things she'd learned. It wasn't fair that Dennis, Dean and Colin were struggling like that.

"We need a fairer system." She said to Malfoy as soon as he floo'ed in from wherever he'd been.

"What are you talking about?" He said. He was clearly tired, she could tell by the way he moved.

"Some people are really struggling and are having trouble supporting themselves."

"Well, they need to do something then, don't they?" He said.

"What are they supposed to do, get a job? There are no jobs."

"Then they have to create a business or something."

"You have money, you can give some of it away?"

"I'm not giving my wealth away, that's madness and it wouldn't achieve anything." He said looking at her like she was crazy. "One is wealthy and secure when one has money, giving it away kind of defeats the purpose."

"Well, I say we have to take care of people." She said. "And it's my money too, isn't it?"

"Like hell it is." He said. "Sorry love, but you don't have free reign over the Malfoy wealth. I'm not stupid."

"So I have no access to money?" She said.

"If you need anything, I will get it for you." He said. "But I am not supporting all and sundry, least of all your no hope causes."

"How can you be stingy when people are struggling? It isn't normal times, we can't behave like everything is the way it was, it isn't. If you refuse to give money away, you can at least give people jobs."

"There are no jobs, there are no businesses, they disappeared when the people disappeared along with the markets they served."

"You still have piles of money." She said. "I can't believe you're not willing to help."

"It wouldn't help, it would just delay the inevitable. You don't enable an untenable situation, you waste everyone's time and waste what's left of my wealth."

She seethed as she admitted that she could at a stretch see his point, but it was a cold stance and she wasn't comfortable with it.

"Do you only care about yourself?" She said sharply.

"I'm not prepared to go destroy my family in some vain attempt to appease your misplaced conscience."

"The part that makes you a decent human being is that you try." She said.

"No, that is the part that makes you a Gryffindor, the full willingness to throw your lot on a completely doomed venture. Sometimes you have to take the small blows to achieve the longer term gains. That is part of being an adult."

"No, you have to care for the people around you."

"And you don't do that by supporting unsustainable situations." He said. "We are talking around in circles, its pointless." He said and started walking away.

She followed him into the dining room where a nice meal was being served for them.

"Everything has to be your way, doesn't it?" She said, the familiar anger was boiling inside her.

"With my family and my family's wealth it does." He confirmed.

"And my opinion doesn't matter a bit?"

"Are you part of this family?" He said.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Have you even told anyone that we're married?"

She couldn't quite find what to say, because she had not informed anyone of that fact. It was just a temporary state that would end within a year. Everyone knew they were having a baby, but she hadn't informed anyone that it was a formal arrangement as well.

"Would it make a difference if I did?" She said challenged in a quiet voice.

"No, probably not."

"I didn't think so." She said feeling like she won a point. "Maybe I haven't told anyone because I don't want people to think I would put up with someone who tried to control everything including me. Everything has to be your way. That is not how you have a relationship."

"What do you know about relationships?" He was shouting now. "I might like a wife that listens to what I say."

"Someone who does what you tell them to." She snorted.

"Someone who trusts me implicitly." He said. "You certainly don't. You don't trust anyone, not even your friends."

She snorted again with the ridiculousness of the statement.

"I trust my friends with my life."

"Really, then why haven't you told them about our marriage?"

"Because it doesn't matter." She said back. She hadn't intended to say it quite so sharply.

"Well, there we go." He said. "And probably a good thing, because I don't think I could tolerate being attacked every time I walked through the door for the rest of my life."

Chapter 29

Chapter 29

Hermione didn't go down to dinner the next night. She didn't want to deal with him. How dare he accuse her of not trusting her friends, she trusted them with her life. Alright, so maybe they couldn't be completely trusted not to get themselves killed, do their homework or to not absolutely say the wrong thing at times, but she trusted them completely. She did not have trust issues. If anyone had trust issues it was him, he obviously didn't trust a person to have a personality beyond the one he assigned them.

They didn't really speak at all when they occasionally stumbled across one another. Hermione spent more and more time helping Harry paint Grimmauld Place. She particularly liked when Ron, Pansy and Neville would come over on Friday night. They would invite Dean and the Creeveys as well. They looked a little skinny. Collin had taken a job working in the Hogwarts fields, so they weren't outright starving.

Hermione still simmered with the unfairness of it all and Malfoy's Laissez Faire approach. Sometimes you had to actively get involved and fix things, why couldn't he see that.

"I wonder what will happen now that Blaise Zabini's been arrested." Dean said.

"What? When?" Hermione asked.

"Marcus Belby arrested him." Dean continued. "This morning."

"They've been having their little tiff about our world's coffers for a while." Harry said. "Arresting him is a pretty drastic step though. Belby thinks Zabini needs to do what he's told and he's flatly refused."

"You can't just arrest someone because they believe in different policies." Hermione said. "That is completely illogical."

"Solved the problem though, didn't it?" Dennis said. "Belby's raided the Gringotts vaults."

"Yeah, but who's vault's?"

"People who aren't here anymore." Ron said.

"They still belong to someone." Pansy said. "Someone will be the closest relation to that person, and that money belongs to them."

"They probably don't need it." Ron said.

"Who are you to say that?" Pansy fired back. There was obviously some tension in the Weasley household.

"All I'm saying is that there are pressing needs now." Ron fired back.

"It could turn out that it's your money and how will you feel when you ended up subsidising the running of Belby's Ministry."

"There must be some fairer way of everyone pitching in." Harry said. "Like I said, taxes. There just isn't any mechanism for collecting them. "

"Well I can't afford to help." Dean said. "I don't care what anyone says, I've got nothing to give, I am seriously living from knut to knut."

The conversation went on and on. The euphoria about defeating the werewolves was certainly wearing off and the problems were coming out of the woodwork. Hermione felt overwhelmed with the scale of them. There were no easy answers and it didn't seem that everyone was interested in pursuing solutions either. Malfoy seemed to be quite happy with the status quo.

Things didn't seem to change much between her and Draco. They both kept to themselves after their little tiff. She would see him

outside once in a while. She would watch him from the window where he didn't notice her. He didn't look happy and he looked tired. She had no idea what he did all day. She wondered if Belby had raided any of the Malfoy's wealth. Maybe that is what he was worried about. He obviously thought Belby was a thief, out to steal all their money.

The unilateral approach was a bit hard handed, but they really did need to do something about it and perhaps a unilateral decision was all that could be done. A necessary evil if you will.

She wondered about herself and Malfoy, it might not be any wonder that they weren't on speaking terms, it would be a miracle if they were. It would be silly to think it could be any other way.

She wanted to ask him about what was going on. He knew a lot more than them about what was going on, she was sure of it. The Gryffindors had always been a bit sidelined when it came to gossip, they were often the target of it, but often the last to hear it. Gossip seemed to finally reach them through the Patel sisters.

Maybe they didn't have to fight. Maybe they could be civilised for the sake of the baby, it shouldn't be that hard. It was just that he rubbed her the wrong way. She wanted nothing to do with him, but she also wanted to engage with him because this ridiculous attraction still drove her impulse to seek him out. Obviously she fought it every chance she got, but it was still there underneath it all, along with her resentment for it.

There weren't as many people the next time she went to Diagon Alley, she liked going on market days. It was nice to see everyone and to learn how they were getting on. She ran into the Patil sisters who were shopping at one of the garden stalls.

"A bit of a quiet day, isn't it?" Hermione said.

"Its not unexpected considering the fight between Entwistle and Nott." Parvati said.

"What fight?" Hermione asked.

"They had this huge fight. Wands drawn and everything. No one is really sure why, neither of them has made any statement why. And now that Nott has been arrested, there are stirrings of malcontent."

"Because Entwistle wasn't?"

"Well no, he's Belby's mate, isn't he?" Padma said. "They've been thick as thieves since fourth year."

She could have said something about Malfoy thinking Belby was a thief, but she did not contribute to childish gossip. Particularly as the Patil girls would spread it far and wide.

"He can't just favour his friends like that, that's unseemly." Hermione said.

"It looks like he just did." Parvati said.

"But he's the Minister." Hermione said.

"And an eighteen year old boy." Padma said. "And discretion has never been the biggest part of his valour."

"How did we end up with him as Minister again?" Hermione stated with creeping doubts about Belby's fitness for the job. "Cho would have done a much better job."

"Cho's a bitch." Padma said revealing a past between the girls that Hermione didn't know about. "It would so have gone to her head if she won, she would be completely impossible."

"I still think Lupin should be Minister." Parvati said. "Why couldn't we just force him to do it?"

"Apparently he is still struggling to make a reasonable wolfsbane potion and he is drained and deflated most of the time." Padma said. "That reminds me, did you hear Eddie Carmichael is back? He's a

werewolf now. Seriously, I couldn't think of anyone less suitable to be a werewolf. He is still the biggest geek on the planet."

I'm glad to hear he isn't dead." Hermione said.

"Lupin is taking him under his wing." Padma continued.

"Now that he's a werewolf, Lavender thinks he's all dishy." Parvati said with derision. "That girl is an idiot. She works at Hogwarts at the nursery for the littlies."

Hermione's head was spinning with the gossip. Those two really were professionals. They were practically the news grapewine at the moment. But she'd had enough for one day. The news on Belby and his actions left her a little disturbed.

Malfoy came into her room later in the afternoon as she was sitting reading one of the old tomes from the rather spectacular Malfoy library. He walked in her room and she bristled because he didn't knock. She had no idea what he wanted.

He leaned back on the wall and didn't say anything until she looked up.

"I want you to stay here as much as possible." He finally said.

"Why?"

"Its just not safe." He said. "There is too much uncertainty."

"I can't just stay here all the time, I'll go mental." She said. "I know things aren't ideal, but I think you're overreacting a bit. Besides, I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

"You're a target. I don't want you to go out alone. If you need to go somewhere, I will take you. Or have Potter go with you."

She was going to dismiss him until he mentioned her taking Harry as a guard. That told her that he was quite serious. Age old rivalry

meant that he would not recommend her relying on Harry for anything unless he was dead serious. Obviously he was willing to put that aside.

"What's going on?" She asked with more suspicion.

"It's just a mess out there." He said. "And you are way too trusting."

"I thought I didn't trust anyone." She said.

"You don't trust the people you should, and have a ridiculous propensity to think everyone else is trustworthy. What I am saying is that you are too trusting to see trouble coming. Just if you need to see your friends, do it at Potter's house." He said with his arms crossed. There was no humour or teasing in his voice. He pushed off the wall and left the room before she could question him further.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

Hermione couldn't catch Draco at all the next day. She hated not knowing what was going on. She wanted to go to Diagon Alley and check things out for herself, but he had practically ordered her to stay away from there. She hated being ordered around and it certainly rubbed her the wrong way, but she did as he asked because she knew he was serious. Even though he hadn't shown her the courtesy of explaining.

Instead she went to Harry's and found him in the kitchen drinking tea. Ginny was out apparently.

"Apparently there are some squabbles amongst the Slytherins." Harry said. "I don't know much about it. Dean was saying that Belby is trying to keep out of it as much as possible."

"Malfoy seems to be quite worried." Hermione said.

"That is interesting." Harry said. "Maybe the Slytherins don't have his back like they used to."

"Why would the Slytherins be against Draco?" Hermione said.

"Greed seems to be the likely reason. Malfoy controls a chunk of the food chain, which is about the only economic activity going at the moment. And since when is he Draco?"

Hermione blushed and then felt like an idiot because she blushed. "Its... its just familiarity I guess."

"Not something I ever thought I would hear you say."

Hermione had an urge to stroke her belly but she repressed it. Maybe not the best idea to draw attention to exactly how familiar

they had been.

"He's practically forbidden me from leaving the house." She said.

"Well, maybe not such a bad idea until the Slytherins have their little tiff sorted. Apparently some of them are really resentful at the Ministry for taking funding out of Gringotts."

"Its not like Gringotts belongs to them."

"They obviously see it differently."

"Well, they can't just get away with taking over Gringotts. They don't get to make the decisions about money just because they collectively have more." Hermione said.

"And they won't, but we don't want to get involved with the Slytherin internal politics either."

"Seriously, did they have to choose now to be petty squabbles? What we need right now is a bit of stability."

"The Slytherins aren't the only problems." Harry said.

"Why can't everyone just be reasonable?" Hermione whined.

"Because everything has broken down, we are practically lawless." Harry said. "We were barely hanging on when we were at Hogwarts, now that we've all gone our separate ways, things are getting worse." Harry said.

"How far backwards can we slide though?" Hermione asked. "No one gains when we slide backwards."

"I guess people want to change things now before we rebuild and things become more set. If they get in now, they control things in the future."

Hermione didn't feel better after speaking to Harry. The problems plagued her. Surely it could just be fixed. If everyone tried, they could fix it. She tried to think of things she could do, but nothing clear was presenting itself. All she could do was appeal to people and frankly a few of them weren't all that interested in what she or anyone else had to say.

For once she seriously had to consider that they wouldn't just bounce back. She had always been really sure that if they just managed to get through this period, they would come out alright on the other side. People would chose to take up the task where it was needed and things would just settle.

If she hadn't been pregnant she would even consider taking on the Daily Prophet, surely it couldn't be that hard to find a supply of paper. Surely if she tried, she could work out how to get the printers going. Someone would be happy to fell trees, wouldn't they. But being pregnant, she was going to have her hands full. Too full on to take on a big task, at least until the child was one.

Maybe she could convince someone else to do it. Sadly the job was well suited to a Slytherin. Pansy had the right interest in information and contacts to pull it off, but unfortunately girls like her didn't work, they raised families in luxury. Although her expectations couldn't be that high considering she ended up with Ron. Maybe it was worth suggesting it.

Draco came home close at dinner time. She'd been waiting for him. She could hear him moving around from the library where she was camped out on a chair. She went to seek him out because he rarely sought her out.

She joined him in the dining room where dinner was served.

"What have you been doing today?" She asked, wanting to know more about what was going on and what his role in it was.

"I have been sorting out distribution of fish. That is how exciting my life is at the moment." He said with sharp tones. His hair was falling in his eyes. It was unusually long. She realised that he didn't have a barber anymore.

"Someone is fishing?"

"Muggles." He said. "A small village on one of the North Sea islands is fishing. There isn't any fuel to run the big fishing fleets, so there is only small catches, or which the surplus is being bought by myself. Well not bought, traded. There isn't any muggle money anymore, banking system collapsed and all our muggle accounts went with it. That is what I have been doing. Yourself?"

"I saw Harry."

"Oh good. How is the boy wonder?" Draco said with a tone between derision and lack of interest.

"He said there are some 'squabbles' going on in the Slytherin camp." She said.

Draco looked up at her, studying her face. Then returned his attention to the food.

"Seemingly the reason why I can't leave the house." She prodded.

"I didn't say you couldn't leave the house, I just said you shouldn't do it alone."

She studied him as he ate. He wasn't entirely the same person anymore, she realised. He was the head of the household and there was little time for him to be the spoilt brat he had always been. She did respect him a little for putting that aside and stepping up when required, but he was still a total arsehole. But gone were the malicious grin and verbal attacks he has subjected her to over the years.

She'd never been completely sure she had gotten the upper hand with him. She had won some battles here and there, but the war was certainly without a clear winner. He wasn't fighting anymore, there were no more sly attacks on her character, her friends or appearance. He still had goes at her values, but they were more in support of his arguments.

She wasn't sure how she felt about their truce. She had never explicitly agreed to it, but he just didn't engage in the same way. Maybe it was because they were now 'connected' or maybe he just grew up. There was a part of her that had grown accustomed to being the focus of his attention whenever she walked it the room, the target of his ire. The reasonable part of her always dreamed that a collaborative and grown up relationship was possible with someone like him, it was just that lukewarm felt so much less than the heat she was used to. Heat was heat, and he had hated her with a passion.

And now there was a distinct lack of passion. She'd hated him and everything he stood for, and then she'd hated him some more, to the point where the hate had turned into something else. Embarrassing as that was. And he seemed to have gone the other way, feeling nothing.

His concern was always related to the baby inside of her. He didn't even bother to really insult her anymore. Now that it was gone she kind of missed it.

If she was brutally honest with herself, she would admit that she had lost this war and he had won. She was the one still stuck there, stuck on him, and he wasn't. The realisation struck her like a punch in the gut. Losing burned, and she wasn't sure how she got there. Evidently she had been outplayed somehow or player herself out. She wasn't sure.

She wondered if he sat there, across the table, confident in the knowledge that he was victorious. He wouldn't be gloating over it, at least not to her face as his victory was dependent on complete

indifference. Or maybe he had just truly moved on, completely unwitting and uncaring.

"Eat something." He said.

"I'm not hungry." She said. Her stomach was in knots over her realisations. He narrowed his eyes.

"I've been grazing all day, like a cow. Don't worry, the baby is not being deprived."

She'd kill for a glass of wine. But she wouldn't, alcohol is not good for the baby. She felt like an incubator, who's wishes was completely irrelevant to her role as an incubator.

She watched him put his cutlery down and pick up his glass of wine, take a big sip and put it back on the table.

"You're showing." He said.

"I know." She said, trying to smile. She wasn't sure what she felt. Resentment maybe.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

Hermione heard something. It wasn't much, just a little crack outside as she lay in bed. It was unusual as it was always quiet at the manor. There must be some kind of animal out there, a hedgehog or something.

She heard a second crack as a twig broke. She fully woke up then, there was definitely something out there. Something moving around in the garden below. She listened some more and got a shot of adrenalin as she heard whispers. She jumped out of bed and approached the window, far enough back that she wouldn't be covered by the moon light.

There were people out there. People coming at night, in stealth mode. She couldn't claim to know much about Slytherin etiquette, but she was pretty sure this wasn't normal. She quietly put on a dressing gown and snuck out of her room.

Draco's room was down a couple of halls and she stopped in front of his door. She didn't want to make any noise in case the people outside heard. She had her wand tightly gripped in her hand as she opened Draco's door.

"Draco?" She whispered as loudly as she dared. She heard nothing. She walked into the dark room. She could see his pale skin in the moonlight. His sleeping form in the bed lying on his stomach, with the sheets covering his lower half. An image she hadn't seen for a while, one to be stored for later, whether she liked it or not.

She touched his shoulder lightly and called his name.

"Huh?" He said in a sleep croaky voice. "What's wrong?"

"There are people outside."

He was rubbing his nose, obviously not with it. Until the penny dropped. "What do you mean people outside?"

"I could hear them. They were whispering."

He pulled the sheet back and stepped out of bed. Completely naked. Hermione couldn't help but blush and look away. He moved to the window and studied the terrain outside.

"Get dressed." He said sharply.

"What's going on?"

"Get dressed, now."

His tone told her there was something wrong. She ran back to her room and pulled on a t-shirt and the one pair of jeans that she could still button up.

He came into her room when she was putting on her shoes.

"Have you tried the floo?" He asked.

"No." She said. "What is going on?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm pretty sure we are being attacked."

"Attacked? That's ridiculous."

"Oh, do your friends sneak around your garden at night?"

"No."

He pulled her hand and took her downstairs. He pulled her to a fireplace and threw some floo powder down into the grate. Nothing happened.

"They've blocked the floo. Bet they've blocked apparition as well." He took her elbow and tried to apparate to no luck.

"Who are they and why are they doing this?"

"I'm not sure." He said absently. "It will take them time to get through the wards. How long depends on who and how many they are. If its who I think it is, we might be in a spot of trouble."

"You know who this is?"

"I have a suspicion."

"Is it werewolves?" She said. "I thought you said they couldn't get through your wards."

"Werewolves can't. And no, I don't think its werewolves. I suspect it is someone who is much more familiar with my wards. Perhaps even made an adjustment or two, from the inside."

That meant that he thought it was someone who was here before, maybe someone who lived here. A Slytherin.

"We need to count how many there are." He said. "You do the south and the east, I'll do the rest."

She ran into the library and looked out the window. She ran along having a look in the rooms facing south and east.

"I saw five." She said as she returned to the foyer.

"They're organised." He said.

"These are your own attacking you." She said.

He didn't respond.

"Who needs enemies with friends like yours." She said. "And you complain about my friends."

"Please, like your friends wouldn't attack me if there was a possibility that they would get through the ward."

"My friends don't run around and attack people."

"Really?" He said. "I have scars from all the hexes your mates have thrown at me over the years."

"And each one of them was well deserved." She said. "What do they want?"

"That is a bit more difficult to ascertain." He said. "I'm pretty sure they didn't come for tea and crumpets."

"Do you think they want to hurt us?" She asked nervously, starting to feel a bit of panic.

"I'm pretty sure they're not here for you." He said. "I hope." He finished after a while.

"What do we do?" She asked. "I guess we will have to fight. Maybe we can send out an owl for help."

"I think they might have anticipated that already." He said.

"Ten against two." She said. "Not great odds, but its not impossible." Actually there was no way to cut that and make it sound good. Crap, this was serious.

"You are not getting into a fight." He stated.

"Do you have any better suggestions?"

There was a loud crack.

"They've compromised the wards." He said. "Bastards."

"Why would they want to hurt us?" She said, her mind grasping to make sense of this. "Maybe they object to us being together."

"Maybe, although I suspect this has to do with pure old fashioned greed." He said and he pulled her along towards the stairways.

"Where are we going?" She asked. "We might be able to jump off one of the balconies while they enter the house."

"You're not jumping off a balcony." He said tersely. "You're pregnant remember."

"Doesn't mean I'm incapacitated."

"It does mean that you can't go jumping of balconies, or get into ridiculously outnumbered duels."

"Yeah, I don't think we have much of a choice here. Unless you think you can settle this diplomatically. We don't have any other options."

"There is one more option."

"Oh?" She said with a sense of hope.

He dragged her down one of the halls on the third floor and stopped in front of a wall. He silently said a spell and a door materialised in the wall.

"There's a secret tunnel!" She said.

"Sadly no, but there is a room that only a Malfoy can access. They won't be able to get in until its opened by a Malfoy, or opened from the inside."

"They could just wait then."

"Yes." He said.

"Eventually we would have to come out. They'd just wait."

"Which is why we'll resolve this thing prior."

He lit a candle in the room. It wasn't large and it wasn't particularly clean. There was nothing in there, just an empty room.

"Ok." He said. "So you're going to stay in the room and I am going to resolve this."

"What? No. If we fight together, we have a chance. A tiny one, but a chance. There is no way you can take them alone."

"Well, I am touch in your confidence at my abilities, but this is the only way." He said. "I am pretty sure that they're not after you, but I can't be certain. And it could be conceivable that you weren't here tonight. So, we stick to that. You stay here, and I will deal with them."

"But.."

"You're going to stay in this room until its safe, and then you're going to go to Potter's and stay there. They'll never go after you at Potters, they know that if they attack Potter, it would be civil war and I am pretty sure they don't want that."

"But.."

He pulled her towards the wall and placed his wrist on her shoulder, weighing her down, pinning her. He was so close to her now, demanding her full attention.

"Please Granger, you are carrying my son inside you. That comes before anything. The one thing I won't risk. This isn't your fight, Granger. Let me take care of this. Stay in this room Granger. For once in your life will you do what you are told. Please."

She chewed on her lip. It felt wrong, but his logic was inescapable. She knew this child meant a lot to him. To her too. It wasn't right to risk the child, but it also felt wrong to leave him to face such an unfair challenge on his own. If it was just her, she would never walk away from such an unjust action, but it wasn't just her now, there was another tiny being to consider. She nodded.

"Promise me Granger." He said stepping a bit closer, making sure she could not evade. They were touching and she felt boxed in by

him. "Promise me you'll stay in this room."

"I promise." She said.

He stepped back and she could breathe again, but his hand was still on the wall behind her. Suddenly he stepped back towards her again and pulled her head towards him. He kissed her. Firm, thorough and not rushed. She was so stunned, she couldn't think of anything to do other than to let it happen. A part of her didn't want to do anything to stop it. That part drank the kiss like a person lost in the desert without water. And then it ended and he turned away.

Her lips were burning as she stood there, while he turned and looked at her as he closed the door to the safety room. She could hear magic sealing the entrance. Her lungs were burning from not breathing and she let out a shuddering breath.

She may not see him again, she realised. This may end badly. She had a knot in her stomach as she sank down to the floor. The little candle barely lit the room. She could hear more noises, then voices. There was yelling. She lay her ear down to the floor to see if she could hear anything, but the voices were too muffled to make out what was being said or who was saying it.

And then she heard a pain-laced scream, and she knew it was Draco's. It was the cruciatus, she was sure. Whatever wrong he had done her, ever, or whatever wrong there was with him, she forgave him in that moment. She didn't want this. It hurt just to hear it.

She wanted to rush out of the room and run to the rescue with hexes blasting, but she'd promised him. He'd never forgive her if she did. The safety of the baby was more important than his safety or his pain, or his life. So she stayed put and tried to block the sounds out.

And then the noises stopped. There was some scrapes and shuffling, but then complete silence. There were noises a few minutes later. Someone was walking around. She wanted it to be him but knew it wasn't.

She stayed in the room. She didn't know how long. The candle burned out and she stayed yet. After an eternity, she snuck out of the room. It was dark. She snuck down the stairs as quietly as she could, her wand gripped in her hand. She couldn't hear anyone in the house, but she wasn't entirely sure, her heartbeat was so loud she wondered if it blocked out other noise. She searched every room, but she couldn't find anyone, or him.

Finally she ran out into the garden and apparated to Harry's as soon as the broken wards would let her.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32

Hermione arrived outside Grimmauld Place and rushed inside as she had complete access through his wards. She checked the kitchen but he wasn't there. Neither was he anywhere in the downstairs. She went upstairs and she heard a TV playing on one of the rooms.

She paused for a minute. Something in her mind was screaming at her, but her thoughts were too jumbled to make out what it was. It was important though. She took a minute to calm down and let the thought surface. It said something about if she does this wrong, Draco could end up paying for her impulsiveness.

Her blood was racing through her, as was adrenalin, it practically hurt to keep still. She wasn't sure how Harry would react. He always responded to injustice, but was he going to respond the right way. Did she trust him to do the right thing? She trusted his intentions, but not always his actions.

She needed to think. She felt like she was playing a game with half the pieces missing. She needed to think this through, although her gut was telling her to react in any way possible.

She walked in the room and saw Harry and Ginny snuggled on a sofa.

"Hermione!" He said with surprise. And then he got suspicious. "Are you alright?"

She nodded. "Can I stay here for a bit?"

"Of course." Harry said. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine." She said.

Harry got up from the sofa and led her out of the room.

"Did he hurt you?" Harry said with concern.

Hermione wanted to spill everything, let it all out and envelop in Harry's hug, but she couldn't take any chances. She needed time to think about the best course of action. Harry would react immediately.

"No." She said. "He's not there." It wasn't a lie. "I didn't want to be alone."

"Take the spare room." Harry said. "Stay as long as you want."

She nodded and went up the stairs. If she stayed a minute longer she was going to start to cry and Harry wouldn't give up until she told him everything if she did.

She wanted to tell him so badly it ached, on top of the ache and worry she already had for Draco. She shut the door and crouched down on her heels in the dark room. Everything felt surreal. Things like this don't happen in real life. But he was somewhere, hurt, potentially being tortured, or even dead.

Her heart gave a painful twist at the thought. She had to get control of her panic, she realised. Had to be calm and collected, and to make her formidable mind work for her. It's the biggest weapon she had and she had to do this right.

She sat on the floor for an hour trying to figure out what had just happened. The problem was she didn't know what had just happened. She didn't know the Slytherins and what this meant. Neither did Harry, or anyone else she knew.

Pansy did. She evaluated what she knew of Pansy. Draco's ex, says she cares about him, and could probably explain what had just happened. Or she could be lying through her teeth. It was a risk, but she had to do something.

She rushed down the stairs.

"Hermione?" Harry called from inside the room.

"I got to go out for a bit." She said and kept going.

She apparated to the Burrow as soon as she was out the door. The whole house was dark as she banged on the door.

"Who is it?" She heard Ron on the other side of the door.

"Its me, let me in."

"Hermione?" He said and opened the door. "What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to Pansy."

"Its really late." Ron said as Pansy walked up behind him.

"Its important." She said and grabbed Pansy's wrist and dragged her into the kitchen. "I need to talk to her for a minute."

The kitchen was dark and Hermione lit her wand. She didn't entirely trust Pansy and wanted to see her face. Ron followed them and Hermione suspected that it wasn't worth the fight to get him to leave.

"They took him." She said. "They came in the night and took him."

"Who?"

"I don't know!" She said. "Your kind."

"Draco, they took Draco?"

"Yes." You daft cow, she wanted to say but didn't.

She watched the thoughts circle in Pansy's mind.

"Fucking Nott!" She said.

"Nott? Nott did this?"

"Bastard." Pansy said.

"But they're friends. They hurt him."

"They've never been friends." Pansy said. "They hurt him?"

"Yes. Draco said something about greed."

"That sounds right. How did they hurt him?"

"I don't know. Draco made me promise to hide."

Pansy was pacing now.

"Malfoy can take care of himself." Ron said dismissively. "If you're concerned, tell the Ministry and let them sort it out."

"Ron!" Pansy said. "This is serious. Nott isn't messing around. And besides, Belby doesn't want to get involved."

"So they just leave him to it?" Hermione said. "You can't just go around stealing people out of their beds."

"Belby is trying to keep the peace." Ron said. "And maybe the troublemakers should be relegated to sort out their own problems elsewhere."

"You're a jerk Ron." Pansy said. "But he is right. Belby will sacrifice just about anything to keep the peace. He is trying to avoid all out war."

"Draco said that Nott would not go after me at Harry's because it would mean a civil war."

"Harry would blow his top if someone attacked his house." Ron said.

"Where would they have taken him?" Hermione asked Pansy.

"Probably to Nott's house." Pansy answered.

"Would he hurt him?" Hermione asked. "Really hurt him?"

Pansy scratched her head, thinking it over. "I don't know. They would hurt him, beyond a doubt and enjoy it too. I'm not sure if they would..."

"Kill him."

"Nott finds it distasteful, but his father was all about the murder and mayhem." Pansy said. "Nott isn't in it for the joy of it, he's in it for the money."

"Will he inherit Malfoy's money?" Hermione asked.

"No, that would be Stewart Ackerly." Pansy said.

"The third year Ravenclaw?" Ron said.

"He is the closest relation on the male line." Pansy said. "But taking Malfoy out of action means that Nott can take over the economy, set himself up nicely."

"We have to do something." Hermione said.

"I am not running to Malfoy's rescue." Ron said. "Pansy, I know he is one of your mates, and that you two were an ...item," he said with distaste, "but I have my pride and I am not running after him because he can't sort it with his mates. He's been a complete arsehole to me and my family his whole fucking life."

Pansy watched him for a minute. And then she slowly pushed off the kitchen counter. "But Ronnikins." She said walking towards him slowly. She dug her finger into his shirt. "I need you. You're so strong and I need you. How am I supposed to do this all alone? They might hurt me too if you're not there to protect me."

Hermione wanted to throw up and she watched Ron's resolve absolutely crumble. That was not a display that should ever be public. Pansy's finger was now in Ron's waistband and Ron had complete forgotten that there was someone else in the room.

"So what are we going to do?" Pansy said, turning her attention back to Hermione.

"I guess we go get him." Hermione said.

Ron wasn't hearing anything.

"I'll go talk to Harry." Hermione said and left. Wherever that show was going, she didn't want to see it.

Hermione apparated back to Grimmauld Place. She felt strong enough to talk to Harry now, without breaking down in tears. She felt strong because they had a plan. Well, the beginnings of a plan. She had a rough idea of where he was, and according to Pansy, he was probably alive. It gave her a sense of hope.

Harry was still watching TV when Hermione got back, but Ginny had gone to bed.

"Harry." She said and sat down.

"Something's up Hermione and you're not telling me."

"Yes." She said. "I had to speak to Pansy before I talked to you. Some people came to the Manor last night and took Draco."

"What do you mean took him?"

"They surrounded the house and blocked any way of leaving."

"So they took Malfoy and left you?"

"Draco hid me in this safe room, and they were all gone when I came out. He said I should come here, that they wouldn't dare go after me

here. Wouldn't want to start a war. Nott has taken him and that's not on."

"Well maybe starting a war isn't such a good idea." Harry said.
"Maybe barging in with wands blazing is pretty much a declaration of war. Are you sure you want to do that?"

"What am I supposed to do?" Hermione said. "Just leave him to be tortured or whatever they're doing to him."

"They might not be doing anything to him."

"You didn't hear it, Harry." She said. "They were hurting him. And even if they were just holding him somewhere, it isn't right."

"This is Malfoy we're talking about." Harry said. "He wouldn't do it for us."

"He would do it for me." Hermione said. "He gave up a chance of fighting because he wouldn't put me at risk."

"Or the baby." Harry said tentatively.

"I don't care." Hermione said. "I am going after him with or without you, and I don't care if Nott takes offence. So are you going to back me up?"

Harry was quiet for a second. "Or course I am, like that was ever in question. Ok, so let's go start a war. I'll put my glad rags on."

Chapter 33

Chapter 33

"Unless Theo has changed his wards, I should still be able to get in." Pansy said. "Although after this, I think my welcome will be withdrawn."

"So we just apparate in?" Harry said.

"Basically." Pansy said. "Here is my best representation of Nott's house. Its not fantastic, but it's the best I can do."

"He should either be locked in a bedroom or maybe even the dungeon."

"What is with Slytherins and their longstanding appreciation for dungeons?" Ron said.

"Nott wouldn't trust Malfoy, so likely he is in the dungeon." Pansy continued while ignoring Ron.

"So when should we go?" Hermione asked.

"Why not now?" Harry asked.

"Everyone will be asleep, which means we would have to be extremely quiet." Hermione said. "Maybe it would be better in the morning, early morning when a little noise wouldn't be quite so noticeable, but there is always the risk that we run into someone."

"It could get messy either way." Harry said.

"Lets go in the morning." Pansy said. "Maybe I can distract Nott."

They settled on going around seven, which meant a bit of sleep. Not that Hermione was likely to sleep much. She lay in Charlie's bed and

tried to get her mind around the plan, the possible things that could happen. And the likely state that she would find Draco in.

Pansy seemed pretty sure that Draco would be alive. Keeping Draco alive would be a risk to Nott, but killing him would be a risk as well as it would be a step that could always be attributable to him if things ever went that way. She hoped Nott would be worried about that. Part of her wanted to go right then and there, but the plan was to wait for morning.

She must have dozed off, because she got a nudge from Harry and it was light outside.

"Time to go, you ready?"

"Yeah." She said. Her body protested a bit from lack of sleep, but she got up. No need to dress, she'd slept in her clothes.

"You should eat something before we go." Harry said as they walked down the winding stairs of the Burrow.

"I can't believe I am doing this." Ron said. "How exactly did you talk me into this?"

"It wasn't all that hard." Pansy said with a grin, then continued teasingly. "When we get back, I'll show you my gratitude."

"Gratitude is an excellent concept." Ron said, completely falling for the ploy. And then they were kissing.

Both Hermione and Harry were having trouble trying to find somewhere else to look.

"Ok, lets go." Harry finally interrupted.

They all gathered around Pansy as she side along apparated them to Nott's house. They landed in a foyer and Pansy pointed them in the direction of the stairs going down. They quietly snuck around the corner.

"Nott!" She started yelling. "I am going to murder him, I swear. The total bastard! Do you know what he did to me? Serious, I am looking to murder someone. Where are you?"

Pansy went on a full tirade through the Nott house.

"Merlin, she can yell." Harry said quietly.

"She is gifted." Ron said as they slowly walked down the stairs. "Do you think there will be a guard?"

"Might be." Harry said. They were down in the servants' area. The Nott house was old, stone based, drafty and cold. They tried to be quiet as they slowly walked down the hall. It wasn't the only access down to the dungeon, but they were less likely to meet Nott or any of his cronies down here.

A muggle girl walked out from one of the doors and froze as she saw them.

"Stupefy." Hermione said quietly and the girl fell over. Ron caught her before she hit the ground.

"How many of them do you think there are?" Ron asked. "Pansy wants us to get one."

"They're not cattle." Hermione said with annoyance. "They're real people, with real feelings."

"You have them."

"Malfoy has them." She pointed out. It was still a topic she was extremely uncomfortable with, even though she had been living off their servitude while at Malfoy Manor.

"What's the harm? If they want to work, why not?" Ron said. "They're obviously getting protection and a place to live in return."

"It's still not right taking advantage of these people just because the muggle world is falling apart."

"So what are you suggesting? We take over the muggle world, enforce order?" Ron said.

"Can we talk about this some other time, maybe some time when we're not breaking into someone's house?" Harry hissed.

They froze as another muggle girl walked out of a room and down the hall away from them. The girl didn't even notice they were there. As the girl disappeared out a door, they continued their progress. The dungeons were across a hallway, with a stairway going upstairs. They could hear Pansy bawling with great big shuddering sobs in between.

"She's a terrific actress." Harry said.

"I hate Harry Potter!" Pansy screamed somewhere upstairs. "Thinks he's better than everyone."

They stared up the stairs to the empty space on the landing above.

Harry shrugged. "It's not like it's going to change their opinion of me, is it?"

Hermione checked the door to the dungeon for charms but there was nothing. They slowly opened the door to the dungeon. It was quiet inside. Harry hissed to see if they got a reaction from a guard, but no one came.

"Pretty confident isn't he? No guards at all." Harry said. "You watch the entrance, Ron." And he indicated for Hermione to move forwards. They walked down with their wands out, ready for action.

Hermione felt her pulse in the throat as she walked down. It wasn't a big dungeon, there must have been six cells. She knew Malfoy had a dungeon like most of the old houses did, she had never seen it.

Apparently Hogwarts used to have one, but it had been dismantled over 200 years ago. She wondered what the purebloods used to do that required them to have dungeons.

She heard a noise coming from the last cell on the right. The light from the door hardly reached to the end of the hall, and the cell was in darkness.

"Draco?" She called in a whisper. She heard more noise as someone walked to the bars. She could see his hair shining in the darkness.

"Granger?" He said. She felt a ridiculous sense of relief. She quickly walked over to the cell. He stood tall in the cell. He had some bruising on his face, but otherwise looked unharmed. She touched his fingers as it wrapped around one of the bars. She just had to touch to make sure he was real. "What are you doing here, Granger?"

"Well, I came to rescue you."

"Do you complete fail to understand the concept of staying out of danger?" He said sharply.

"I brought Harry." She said in a light tone. "He's just over there."

"Oh, that makes me feel so much better." He said with sarcasm.

"Well, do you want out or not?" She said, getting annoyed.

He snorted slightly with annoyance, then said. "Please."

Hermione worked on the charms placed on the cell for a few minutes before she got the door to open. There was a magical alarm on the door, but she managed to diffuse it. All in all, it was only rudimentary protection.

"He's not trying very hard to keep you in." Hermione said.

"He doesn't expect anyone would come for me." Draco said.

"Quickly." Harry said. Draco gave Harry a bit of a nod when they reached him. Hermione knew it was embarrassing for Draco to be rescued by Harry, but he was not too pig headed to accept the help as he was in a bit of a pickle. But he didn't like it.

They quietly walked out of the dungeon and out one of the servants' entrances to the garden outside. They kept walking until they were far enough away to apparate. Harry and Ron disappeared, while Hermione and Draco waited. She took hold of him to side along apparate him.

"To the Manor." He said. He put his arm around her. It had been a few days since their last kiss in the safe room. Her body hadn't forgotten. She had barely slept for a few days and her exhaustion washed over her. She apparated them and they appeared in the Malfoy Manor foyer.

Draco stepped away from her and walked to his study. "I need a wand."

Hermione followed him as he opened a box and pulled out a wand. It had a big serpent's head on it. A wand she had seen before, hid in Lucius Malfoy's walking stick. He eased the serpents head off and put it back in the box, leaving just the straight black wand.

"I'll get my old one back, but this will have to do in the meantime."

"What are you going to do to him?"

"I'm going to make him hurt."

"Don't get in trouble." Hermione said. "He's not worth it."

"Oh, he is worth every effort." Draco said coldly. For the first time, Hermione saw the shadow of his father in him. The cold determination. "The Notts will regret this for generations."

Hermione felt uncomfortable, she didn't like the idea of this feud, one she had become a part of by rescuing him. She knew there was no chance that he was going to just let it go, and to some extent, Nott deserved to be punished for what he did. She just wished none of it had happened.

"I should go check that Pansy returned alright." She said. She wanted to say something but she couldn't find the words. She was glad he was back and glad he was ok. The vibration of stress that had sat in her chest since he'd been taken had gone, but there were still knots upon knots in her stomach. She certainly wasn't in the mood to analyse it.

She moved towards the door and Draco shot out his hand out to the wall to block her way.

"First, I think we need to have a little talk." He said. She could see the steely determination in him. He was going to have his way or no way. It was inescapable to her that he was bigger than her, stronger than her and she knew he was much more capable of using his strength than she was.

"I know you think I am completely incapable of anything because I'm pregnant." She said. "But I'm not. Obviously this world is not entirely risk free, but I had Ron and Harry, and even though you may not rate them for much, I trust them completely."

He moved closer to her and she felt intimidated. She wasn't sure what was going on in his mind.

"And everything worked out well, didn't it?" She challenged.

"The fact that you put yourself at risk is one thing. You know how I feel about it." He said. "But I am more interested in hearing why you would sneak into Nott's house to run to my rescue. I didn't expect that, so I am intensely interested in hearing why."

Chapter 34

Chapter 34

"I have to go check on Pansy." Hermione said, but Draco wouldn't let her pass.

"Trust me, Pansy always lands on her feet." He said. "Now, why did you rescue me, risk your neck and the baby? Especially when some would say you were clearly better off if I was gone."

"How would it have any impact on me?" She said trying to clear her throat, grasping for a distraction.

"You'd have the house, and all of my wealth at your disposal."

"You really don't know me that well if you think that would be any kind of inducement for me."

"How about freedom then?" He said.

She didn't say anything. He was incredibly close. She could feel the heat from him, which sent little fissions down her spine, which was more distraction than she needed at the moment.

She cleared her throat again, trying to clear her mind. "You know what we are like, can stand injustice."

"Not your fight."

"Unfairness is everyone's fight."

"That's a little too extreme, even for you."

She felt intensely uncomfortable as he was honing in on her little secret. One that Mr. I-don't-believe-in-love probably shouldn't know. God knows what he'd do with that information. He would probably be

completely merciless knowing the hated mudblood Gryffindor who'd he'd specifically reviled above all other for most of his life, was in fact in love with him.

A state that she never welcomed, but the jumping heart beat whenever he looked at her, or the sheer electricity when he touched her said that it was definitely the case.

"What else could I do?" She started. "How would I explain to my child that I just left his or her father to rot or die." That was a good excuse. "I'm not completely ruthless."

"Is that so?" He said. The suspicion was written all over his face. Maybe because she was completely avoiding his eyes. If she had any chance of selling this she needed to front up with some eye contact. So she did, and was rewarded with the release of some hormone or other. No wonder people called this madness, it so was and she had no control over it. Merlin, his eyes were beautiful, she couldn't help thinking.

Suspicion was still written in them. "I'm not sure you're telling me the truth. I get this little tingle when people are lying to me. And I'm not convinced."

She was about to shrug when he leaned even closer. He was leaning down bringing his face close to hers, bringing his lips close to hers. She couldn't breath. And she couldn't help leaning up to meet his lips.

And he pulled back sharply. Stepped back complete and watched her darkly. "Huh." He said.

They both knew she had just let her little secret slip. He stepped away and continued away.

Hermione rolled her eyes at her own foolishness. She wished the earth would just open up and swallow her. The balance of power had just shifted dramatically, and she had lost power. On some level she

was now at his mercy and he knew it. She just hoped he wasn't going to be a complete pig about it, but considering who he was, that might just be a miracle.

She went to her room and threw herself on her bed, as much as she could with the bump on her belly. She was beyond tired, but too worried to sleep. She lay on her back and rubbed her belly. If nothing else, she had someone who wanted and needed her love. It was still such an abstract idea that a little person was growing in there. Her baby.

Her thoughts turned back to Draco and the kiss they had shared in the safe room. It had been the perfect kiss. She wondered what it meant. And she wondered what the future would bring. Then the exhaustion took over.

The manor was quiet when she got up again. It was close to dusk and she had slept most of the day. She was famished too, not really remembering eating so much over the last few days. Dinner was not far away. She showered and dressed, then went down for dinner.

"You slept most of the day." He said when she got to the dining room.

"I was a little sleep deprived, it seems." She said and sat down. Well, this wasn't too bad, banal banter beat merciless teasing. "Have you heard from Pansy?"

"Yes, she is fine." Draco said. "She came by earlier."

"Oh." Hermione said, having slept through the entire thing.

"We had some planning to do." He continued. Then they were both silent.

"What are you going to do to Nott?"

"I am going to ruin him." Draco said casually as he ate.

"You can't hurt him." She said. "You would have to pay for it eventually. Just because the Ministry is a mess now, doesn't mean that things don't matter in the long run."

"I can hurt him alright, and there is nothing anyone can do about it." Draco said. "But I am going to get him where it hurts most, and its going to be slow and painful. The trick with destroying someone is to draw it out, no point of just getting rid of someone, that way you can't really hurt them, can you? My restitution over Nott is going to take years, and I am going to attack him and everything he tries to do. And it will be just business, nothing a court can ever have anything to say about."

"You're going to attack him economically." She stated more than asked.

"That was the end game all along." Draco said. "He was just too crass to pull it off properly. I'll show him how its done."

"I thought you were friends." Hermione said, not really understanding the Slytherins.

"We are, or we were." Draco said. "He was foolish and showed his hand."

Just like she had. She had shown her hand, foolishly. She wondered what he had planned for her. So far he didn't seem to be enacting anything. She would just have to wait for the other shoe to drop. He was watching her, she could tell, but she avoided his eyes, focusing on her food.

The ball was in his court and she would just have to sit and wait for his play. Just like Nott. Although most of this whole affair had been his thing. Them being together had been his doing, so was her pregnancy. Her contribution to the whole thing had been to fall in love. Surely he hadn't been anticipating that, she certainly knew she hadn't been. He continued watching her as she excused herself to retire yet again.

He wasn't there the next day, out planning his revenge on Nott, or potentially her. He didn't return for dinner either. She went to bed after watching an old DVD she'd borrowed. The picture was weak, but she had managed to get it working, which pleased her endlessly. Magic related to muggle things was strictly green territory.

She watched some police drama, until she noticed a funny feeling in her stomach. It took half an hour of it for her to realise it was the baby moving. It was moving inside her belly. It was a moment of sheer joy and wonder. She had to tell someone, so she called Harry on the floo network. He was happy for her, but she could tell he didn't quite understand her need to tell anyone.

There was another person she could tell. Someone who shared this with her more intimately. But she wasn't sure if she could tell him, they didn't exactly have that kind of relationship. Maybe he had a right to know. Maybe he had a right to know when she reached certain stages, and being able to feel the baby moving was definitely a stage.

She sat and tried to make up her mind for a while, then decided to bite the bullet. If he thought her a ridiculous creature because of it, it probably wouldn't change his opinion much now anyway. She walked down the hall softly in her PJs. Surely feeling a belly didn't call for formal dress, even with the Malfoys.

She knocked softly on his door. She heard some shuffling inside. It wasn't entirely too late, but he was definitely there. She waited until he opened the door. He was getting ready for bed, with his shirt and shoes off. She'd seen him in this state before, or even worse. Not that she had entirely appreciated it at the time, or been quite so affected by it.

"It is moving."

"What is?" He said.

"The baby."

"Oh." He said. "Its probably supposed to at this stage."

"I know, its just the first time." She said. "Want to feel?"

He was still holding the door, and her question seemed to take him by surprise. Then awkwardly he moved forwards and put his hand on her belly. He held it there for a bit.

"I can't feel anything." He said after a while.

"Maybe it is something you have to feel from the inside." She said, feeling a little embarrassed.

He kept his hand on her belly, the heat from it radiated through her. He was looking at her, she could tell even though she was keeping her gaze strictly on his collar bone in front of her. Her breath hitched again as he moved a bit closer. Leaning into her like he had earlier.

She didn't know what to do, didn't know what he was planning. Maybe just testing her reaction like he had earlier. Why, she wondered angrily, hadn't he proved his point sufficiently before?

He didn't pull back this time. Shots of electricity burned her as his lips made contact. Just the slightest kiss, but it twisted her gut sharply and turned her knees into something less stable.

She shouldn't be doing this, it was just giving him more ammunition. But she wasn't completely in control, and the sensation ruled her.

The kiss deepened a bit before he pulled back. Her body protested him pulling back and her mind chided her for being so completely stupid. She flatly refused to look him in the eye.

"You should go." He said.

"Uh huh." She agreed. As soon as I can make my legs move. His hand was still on her belly. Why was his hand on her belly.

"Go." He said, and gently pushed her away. He closed the door without another word.

She turned back to her room, burning with embarrassment. She knew what she had been thinking when she walked over here, but what it effectively was, was her turning up at his door in her nightwear and he had turned her away. It stung deeply.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35

Hermione didn't sleep well at all. She was exhausted the next day, not to mention embarrassed. Her reason for going to see Draco the previous night was completely legitimate and him telling her to go away was fully within his rights, but it still burned.

She hated being there. Hated her situation. Obviously she couldn't bring herself to hate the baby, because it was an innocent baby, but it belonged here with all the stern looking Malfoys that filled each of the many portraits in the house.

Hermione definitely didn't feel like she belonged and that little fact was more intensely felt this morning. She felt uncomfortable. She didn't want to see Draco at breakfast, then at dinner, and then every day after that. That wasn't healthy, and for her to get over this little thing she felt for him, she needed space. She decided that maybe it was for the best that she leave.

She knew it would be a bit of an imposition on Ginny and Harry, Ginny more than Harry, but it couldn't be helped. She felt a like she needed to get away from here and the situation she was stuck in.

She sent a note to Harry asking if it was alright that she stay a few days. When she was away from here, she would determine what to do next. Surely there could be somewhere she could go.

She didn't hear back from Harry for a while. Obviously he was out doing things, maybe working. Harry's relationship with the Ministry seemed a little tentative of late.

She packed all her things, which were not many to begin with, and set them aside for when she heard back from Harry. If it wouldn't work, she could always go to the Burrow, but she'd rather not.

It was shortly after five in the afternoon when she got a note from Harry telling her to come over any time. She levitated her trunk downstairs.

"Where are you going?" She heard from Draco's study as she walked past. She hadn't expected him to be there.

"I am going to Harry's." She said after a second or two trying to think of what to say. "I miss my friends."

"No." He said coming out of the door.

"No?" Hermione said with a dropping jaw. "I recall us having a conversation regarding the fact that you don't get to tell me what to do."

"I am your husband and I have every right to instruct you."

"Instruct this." She said and gave him the finger.

He pulled his wand and blocked her levitation spell so her trunk crashed down on the floor.

"You're not leaving." He said and turned back to his study. Hermione felt heat creep up her skin as anger turned her insides to lava.

"You can't force me to stay." She said. "You're not my jailer. You can't restrict my movements. You couldn't do that even before the adults all disappeared. The only thing you could do to a wife would be social censure. Exclusion. Why don't you just have your friends show a bit of derision, maybe I'll fall in line. Oh no, let's not forget, you don't have any friends."

"I have friends though." She continued. "And they're not going to tolerate you treating me like a prisoner."

"Really?" He finally returned. "Because you risk life and limb one minute, then run away the next. I think your friends are probably under the impression that you are quite mental. Maybe they think

you need a stabilising influence, particularly as you are pregnant with my child. A child that belongs here, just like every other Malfoy child before him."

Hermione harrumphed and turned away. Her trunk was stuck to the ground. It didn't matter, there was nothing in there she couldn't do without. She was going anyway and marched to the fireplace.

Draco shot a spell at the fireplace and she knew he had blocked it. She sighed and turned around.

"What are you doing?" She said calmly.

He turned around and walked back to his study. Apparently he thought the conversation was over.

"I'll friggin walk if I have to." She yelled into the study. "Really, calling me mental is pretty rich coming from you. You're not exactly on Sanity Lane yourself."

"I can't protect you if you're not here." He called from the study.

"You know, that would be much more of a convincing argument if it was even related to what's going on here."

She could hear his footsteps as he was walking back.

"What is that supposed to mean?" He said.

"Oh come on. With what's going on with you and your 'mates', in reality I am much safer at Harry's house. Like you said, none of them is going to attack Harry's."

"Is that right? So what is going on here then?" Draco said.

"You tell me." She said. "This is your deal, all of it."

"I need an heir."

"Well, mission accomplished, so take the barrier off the fireplace and let's all move on."

"No."

Hermione put up her hands in a gesture of exasperated defeat. "I don't know what you're trying to accomplish. You're just putting off the inevitable. You and me in the same house was never going to work. We're having a child, your hair is growing as we speak, so what more is there to discuss?"

"You didn't seem to have a problem with being in the same house last night." He said.

That was a low blow, Hermione felt. "Just a stupid nonsense, baby kicking, thought you'd be interested."

"Come on Granger, we both know you were offering more last night." He said. "And now you are threatening to leave because things didn't go your way."

She couldn't think of anything to say, part of her was deeply offended and wanted to deny his allegation until the end of the world, while the other part knew it was true. Well, not the threatening to leave part, she was leaving but it wasn't a threat, it was for her own well being.

The silence stretched as he gloated a bit in his victory.

"I'm leaving." She finally said and turned.

He grabbed her on the upper arm and held her in place.

"No." He said.

"You're being unreasonable." She claimed. She saw something pass over his features but disappeared as soon as it came. "What do you want, Draco?"

His hand was still on her upper arm, the contact felt uncomfortable. He wasn't gripping her hard, but it was uncomfortable none the less. Touching was far more intense feeling than it should be.

"Why are you fighting something that is so clearly the only logical outcome." She said. "Or what were you expecting that we play happy family here, you off doing your thing, me doing mine, putting on a brave face."

"What is so wrong with that?"

"Because its not real, I am a real person, I don't play house." She said. She felt like they were having a real conversation for the very first time. It felt grown up. "I need more."

"You're the one who screwed this all up." He said. "Although its not really surprising, you screw everything up, don't you?"

She wasn't really sure what he was referring to, but there was something in his eyes that said he may have been speaking more to himself than her.

"You always screw everything up." He continued.

She felt it was a completely unjust statement, in fact she couldn't really think of anything she's royally screwed up since she put Millicent Bulstrode's cat hair in her poly juice potion.

His features sharpened. "I don't care about you, you're just a girl."

That stung, but again she felt like she was missing part of the conversation.

"Ok." She said. "How about we both agree with that and I take my incompetent self off to Harry's. You can let go now." She said and tried to shake his hand off her arm. He didn't. Instead he stepped closer.

"You're so weak." He said.

Ok, that was enough, she went to argue, but she didn't get a chance because he kissed her. It took her completely by surprise. She was astonished and it tried to overrule the outrage she felt, and the embarrassment she felt in that part of her just wanted to melt into the kiss.

As he pulled back she just felt confusion. How does someone go from saying something like that to kissing? Or was he trying to prove a point? But he was still off somewhere in his head, not completely present and accounted for.

"What do you mean I screw everything up?" She demanded. If she was going to be part of this conversation, she wanted to know what it was about. "How exactly did I screw up?"

He pushed her away. He turned to walk away.

"No, you started this, so lets finish, shall we?" She refused to let him leave. "So your turn, Draco. How about a little bit of honesty."

"You want honesty?" He said sharply. "Fine. I love that I have you here. I love that I have commandeered your body to serve by purposes." He said touching her belly. "Something, I want to rub myself all over your belly like the cat stuck into the catnip. I love that I forced you to be here and I love that I'm forcing you to stay. You deserve it after everything you put me through."

"So this is some kind of revenge?" She asked.

"No." He said. "Yes. It wasn't my intention, but on some level, yes."

"You're not making sense." She said. "And in some way, I've screwed this little revenge play up? Why, because I wanted to sleep with you?" She was grasping because she did not understand what was going on in his head.

He wasn't answering her and he was facing away from her. Then he walked away.

"Do you have any idea how dysfunctional you are?" She called after him.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36

Hermione stood rooted to the spot. She didn't know what to do, so she just stood there with her jaw hanging somewhat. Draco has just revealed a little on his internal workings and it looked a bit chaotic in there. Actually that was an understatement, he was practically unhinged.

She marched back to her room, straight to the fire place. Come to think of it, why hadn't she used this one before, besides the fact that her trunk would never fit in this one.

She called for the Burrow and stuck her head in.

"Pansy!" She yelled. "I need to talk to you."

She yelled a couple more times before Pansy opened the door and stepped in the room.

"Hermione." She said coolly. "I'm kind of busy."

She was dressed in a tight top with a tiny skirt. A strange outfit.

"Is that a riding crop?" Hermione asked. "Are you going riding?" Odd outfit for going riding in.

Pansy smiled. "Just waiting for Ron to get home."

Hermione started to ask, but decided midway through that she was probably going to get a disturbing answer, knowledge she could definitely live without.

"Is Malfoy mental?" Hermione demanded.

"Uhh..." Pansy started. "You're going to have to be more specific."

Hermione didn't know where to start, or how to explain.

"He said he wanted to rub himself all over my belly like a cat on catnip." Hermione finally said.

"Oh." Pansy said. "Kinky."

"No, not in a kinky way, I think, more in a muh hah hah way."

"Right, well he does keep things to himself as a general rule, but I haven't noticed any particular cognitive deficiencies. But then we're purebloods, some level of insanity is pretty much guaranteed. And then it comes to Draco, there is perhaps the question of whether it's just you."

"What?"

"Come on Hermione, you must have noticed that he always paid special attention to you." Pansy said. "You drew his eyes like a magnet every time you walked in the room. You wouldn't believe how much I used to hate it. Funny to think we would kind of end up as friends."

Hermione would never go as far as to call Pansy a friend, but considering what they've been through lately, maybe it wasn't a far cry from an official friendship.

"What are you trying to say?" Hermione said trying to return to the conversation. "He objected to absolutely everything about me including the poisoning of the air from my breathing."

"Yes well, there is that. But maybe he objected so strenuously not because you rubbed him the wrong way, maybe because you rubbed him the right way."

Hermione snorted. "That's ridiculous."

Pansy cocked her head to the side. "And then things changed and practically the first thing he did was forcing you into his bed."

"That was for securing his line."

"True, but he picked you. The one person that has been rubbing him in all the sensitive places. He could've chosen absolutely anyone, but he chose you."

"What are you trying to say? Mr. I-don't-believe-in-love has a secret crush on the mudblood?" She said making it sound as ridiculous as it was.

"Well, he might not believe in love, but that doesn't mean he doesn't feel it."

Pansy's answers were not making her feel better, they were just making things more confusing.

"He said I ruined things." Hermione said.

"I don't know." Pansy said with a shrug. "You're talking to the wrong person, you know."

Hermione gritted her teeth and pulled out of the fire. She was angry as a bee. Angry at being jerked around. She didn't know what to do. Obviously, Draco's blocking of the floo network could be circumnavigated pretty easily, and he really couldn't stop her from leaving. However, she wasn't sure she was ready to leave without getting to the bottom of what was going on here.

She needed to think, to mull over what he had said, what Pansy had said. It didn't make sense. The idea that Draco Malfoy was in love with her was so ridiculous that it didn't merit thinking about, but then there were his actions which Pansy seemed to completely misconstrue. And the ridiculously part of her that was jumping up and down fully believing that this was perfect, and that happy endings and happily ever after was perfectly reasonable. Albeit it was a tiny little bit, it was surprisingly vocal. Not that she gave much credence to it.

She took her dinner in her room. Anger still simmered under the surface as she ate. She came to the conclusion that she needed to have it out with him. Whatever was going on she wanted to clear the air before she left. Or this would be hanging around teasing her forever.

She tried to think of ways to have this conversation, but it sounded stupid anyway she started it. She couldn't even think of a good location. Would she be better off with other people around?

No she needed to do this now. Needed to clear everything up nice and neat.

She concluded that there wasn't going to be a nice and neat way of doing it, it just needed to be done. And there was no time like the present, so why put it off.

She took a couple of deep breaths and stepped out of her room. The house was quiet. It was dark now. It must be getting a bit late.

He wasn't in his study which meant he was either upstairs or out. She hoped he wasn't out because she didn't want to put this off. She went upstairs and knocked briefly on his door before stepping inside.

He was there. Sitting in his bed reading some documents.

"We need to talk." She said. "You want to put on some clothes?" He was sitting in bed with pyjama pants only.

"No." He said. "Why is this going to take long?" The cool exterior was back in place.

Hermione instincts were telling her to turn around and leave, but she didn't back away from a situation just because it was uncomfortable. And this needed to be resolved. Except she had no idea where to start and he wasn't helping.

The silence stretched on.

"I have some work to do." He finally said.

"Why did you pick me?" She demanded.

"We've talked about this before. Circumstances has lead to the conclusion that new blood with strengthen us and you are new blood."

"There are other options of 'new blood'," she said, "so why me?"

"If you're going to go for something, might as well go for the best. As a mudblood you are the newest of all."

"You had other options."

"Are you fishing for compliments?"

"I want to know why I'm here." She said with a raised voice. "Pansy says you're in love with me."

"Pansy's full of shit." He said with a snort. "And she's stirring."

"So what was that about you wanting to rub yourself all over my belly?" She asked and he looked uncomfortable, avoiding her eyes. Oh there was definitely something he was hiding, she thought. "Which kind of begs the question, why did you turn me away the other night?"

"Just wasn't in the mood." He said and crossing his arms.

"Really?" She said coming closer to the bed. "A guy your age, not in the mood when offered. I'm not entirely sure that's possible."

"It's possible, besides, been there, done that." He said. "And maybe I'm not into...growing girls."

"Although you've already let slip that you find my bump practically mind altering." She said and sat down on the bed next to him.

"What do you want, Hermione?" He said with exasperation.

"I just want to know what's going on in that twisted head of yours."

"Well, I'm not in love with you if that's what you think. And if you listen to the stupid things Pansy says, then you're just stupid."

"Eloquent." She said. "As I recall, you said that you loved that you had me here."

"A throw away statement, meant to shock you."

"Really?" She said. "And how exactly did I ruin things?"

She watched as his mouth tightened with displeasure. "Did I ruin things because somehow we always end up kissing?" She couldn't believe how bold she was. She brought her hand up and placed it high in his chest. His skin was warm and smooth, and she watched as goose bumps prickled his skin.

"You need to go." He said.

"I am going." She said. "I'm leaving."

He grabbed her wrist as she was moving down his chest.

"But before I go, lets talk about how I ruined things."

"I said it was nothing."

"Let's explore it anyway." She said. Time to see how he reacted. She leant towards his lips. She just wanted to gauge his reaction. She didn't kiss him, she just got really close. "Did I ruin things because I wanted you?"

He wasn't breathing. "Did you want me because I didn't want you?" She continued, so close to him she could feel her own breath bouncing back. She decided that she wouldn't kiss him, it would be too distracting and they would probably never finish this

conversation, so she slowly dropped her head towards his chest instead and placed the merest kiss on the pale skin on his chest. He was breathing now, heavily. Goose bumps raised around the skin she kissed.

"Was that the plan, Draco? You were going to keep me here at arms length. A safe distance." She said and kissing his skin moving up towards his neck where she could see his strong pulse beating under the pale skin. His head was coming down seeking her. He wanted her to kiss him, although he might not be aware of it.

"You are one messed up boy." She said. Her hands were exploring the warm skin on his waist. He was so incredibly warm, she just wanted to sink down and draw it in. But she pulled back. She wasn't going to force this on him and she certainly wasn't going to seduce him, although obviously she could.

No, he was going to have to front up with a bit of feelings and maybe some wounded pride if necessary.

"If you want me, you're going to have to admit your feelings." She said. He looked at her with intense dislike. He might even hate her. "Or I'm leaving."

Chapter 37

Chapter 37

Hermione got off the bed and turned to leave. She walked towards the door, but his hand stretch out from behind her and kept it close as she tried to open it. She hadn't heard him come up behind her. She could feel him standing behind her, like an electrical field making the hairs on her arms stand up. Again she cursed her reaction to him. How was she supposed to keep the upper hand if she turned to putty every time he was close?

She could feel his breath on her skin, he was close.

"You shouldn't bait, sweetheart. You'll have to deal with the consequences." He said quietly.

He moved closer and she could feel him along her back. The heat of him. She closed her eyes and tried to breath. Part of her mind was screaming at her that this was an extremely bad idea. Sarcastically saying, lets pick on the mentally unstable boy with dominating tendencies. Because obviously that was going to end well.

Part of her didn't care how it ended, this tension just needed to end. Some resolution to this situation had to be achieved.

He stroked his face in her hair and his hand came up and stroked her neck. Then he pushed her up against the door with his body. Not hard, just firm. His hands came up her arms and twisted around her fingers as the pressed on the wall.

"Is this what you want?" He asked.

Truthfully, this is exactly what she wanted, she just didn't know if it was a good idea. She couldn't see the consequences if this happened. If he was fighting this before, there was some outcome here he didn't want. What was the outcome she wanted? She wasn't

reckless enough not to consider how things would play out. What did she want? For them to be a happy family after?

Why couldn't they be a happy family? Why couldn't they just be a normal couple?

Because he couldn't decide if he wanted her or not. Or maybe he just couldn't accept that he did. His body reacted to her. On one level he wanted her really bad.

He turned her around towards him and kissed her. A deep, demanding kiss. Her mind could not compete with a kiss like that. Whatever the consequences were, she would deal with them later. At the moment, she couldn't walk away from this. She brought her arms and legs around him to pull him even closer. She wanted his skin, she wanted his heat, she wanted every part of him.

She was back on the bed and he was on top of her. This felt like heaven. He was shedding clothes off her and she was just watching, feeling every touch. He rubbed his thumb down her cheek and across her lips. There was something in his eyes though as he watched her, but she lost sight of his eyes as he leaned down and kissed her again.

Her legs wrapped around him and savoured every contact. Her insides had turned to warm putty and she just wanted him inside her.

"Oh Merlin." He said and wriggled out of his pants. She felt him entering her and she couldn't breathe for the sensation. It just felt so right, even though that part of her mind felt it being him was every kind of wrong. She didn't care. Whatever he was, she was in love with him and she would deal with the consequences later.

He held him close as he moved in and out of her. The exquisite tension sought escape as she strained for every little bit of sensation. She tried and failed to gasp for breath as her body started convulsing around him. How in the world could this be wrong, her mind was screaming. This is perfect, things could be no other way.

The sensation kept coming as he wasn't done yet. It just kept flooding her with each stroke until at last found his release deep inside her. He collapsed down on the bed beside her.

She watched him breath heavily as he recovered. She knew she wouldn't ever have it the same with anyone else. Like it or not, he was it for her, and she couldn't when it came down to it keep any barriers between them.

He pushed himself up on the pillow a bit to rest his head on the head board. She still needed to feel him. She kept her hand on his waist. She realised that the awkward consequences were likely about to happen. She realised he was avoiding her eyes and it hurt. She felt her eyes prickle as she kept them closed.

"You ask too much." He said quietly after a while.

She searched out his eyes, trying to get an understanding of what he said.

"You ask too much." He repeated. "I can't..."

"Then why did you bring us here?" She said. "Did you think I could go through all this and not feel anything? I'm not made of stone."

"It was a mistake." He said.

"A mistake?" She said and hit him. "You brought me here, made me go through all this and it's a mistake? Sorry lets forget? I'm carrying your baby. I'm in love with you. You can't just say it's a mistake lets undo."

"I didn't mean to."

"What did you mean? I can't undo this. Its done."

"I just wanted you to be here." He said barely above a whisper. "It wasn't supposed to go this way."

"You wanted to keep me here, at arms length. I'm not a doll, something you can just keep in your house like an ornament. Why didn't you just let me walk out? Why did you stop me from leaving?"

He didn't answer.

"Why Draco?" She insisted.

"You weren't supposed to fall in love. Haven't I told you it's a ludicrous concept? We were supposed to get along fine. You would be here, and I would be here, and then the baby. And we would all be content."

"But it didn't work that way. Things don't just happen nice and controlled like that."

"It just spun out of control. Its all your fault you know. I'm just kind of stuck now. This is all my fault, I know that." He said. "I'm sorry."

Hermione felt tears starting to well in her eyes.

"If I try to leave, will you stop me?" She asked.

"Probably."

"You can't have it both ways, you have to chose a direction."

"I seem incapable of doing that."

"This isn't fair, Draco."

"I know." He said. "Maybe you should have just left me in Nott's dungeon."

"You know I never could have done that." She said and sat up. "Why did you pick me? Did you pick me because I didn't want you? You do realise that is completely mental. You can't possibly claim you don't know what I'm like. Truth be told you probably knew me better than Harry or Ron ever did. You always knew how to hurt me. Ron always

hurt me, but he didn't really know he was doing it. You knew exactly what you were doing. Did you do this to hurt me?"

"No."

"How can I believe you? You said yes before, when I asked you, you said yes. Why did you pick me?"

He refused to answer. Hermione waited for him to answer, but he wouldn't.

"So now what?" She finally said when it became obvious that he wasn't going to volunteer any more.

"I don't know."

"If you don't let me leave, I'm going to come here every night." She said. "If you won't choose a direction, Draco, I will choose one for you."

"What you're going to punish me by sleeping with me every night?" He said. "As far as punishments go, you're a bit of a soft touch."

"This isn't about punishment, Draco. You put a ring on my finger, you're going to have to deal with whatever issues you have."

"I thought this marriage was fake until the baby was born." He said.

"Well, I thought a lot of things about this marriage that wasn't true as it turns out. You've made this into something completely different." She said. "Were you planning on letting me go leave after the baby was born?"

"You would have been too entrenched by then to leave." He said. "Babies don't encourage change."

"And if I still would have wanted to leave, were you going to let me?"

"Probably not." He said with a grin. She could slap him and be perfectly within her rights. Does he revel in his insanity?

"Is your entire family this demented?"

"My parents had an interesting relationship dynamic." He said but refused to elaborate.

She got up and started to gather her clothes.

"Stuff it." She said and threw the clothes down. "I'm staying here." She said and got back into Draco's bed.

"I like sleeping alone." He said.

"Well you shouldn't have gotten married then, should you?" She said and snuggled in. If he feared closeness and vulnerability, she was going to force it on him until he grew to accept it or relented completely. If he wanted punishment, she was going to dish it out. She snaked her hand around his waist and snuggled into his back. She'd never be able to sleep this close, but he didn't need to know that.

Chapter 38

Chapter 38

Hermione went to Draco's room every night. He was weary at first, but he never turned her away. They didn't speak much during the day. Actually they didn't speak much at all. It felt a bit like they were starting something new. Like some of the crap had been cleared away and they had come to a more genuine place.

There wasn't much of a relationship, but there was sex and that was as good a starting point as any. There was no denying that she loved the sex, partially hormonally driven, but she didn't think she could do without it.

Her belly was getting a little bit bigger every day. General things were getting a bit harder. She felt out of breath at the simplest things. Her mind was turning to more practical purposes. What would happen when the baby arrived. It was still strange to think that a living person was growing inside her.

There was a nursery in the house, disused since Draco had been a baby. It was in dire need of cleaning, but the little elf was more than happy to help with the preparations for a new arrival.

It was strange seeing Draco's old baby things. It was strange to think of him as a baby or what had happened to him in the time between being a completely innocent little baby to the closed off and messed up person he was now. Whatever happened to him was not going to happen to her baby. She was never going to allow her baby to become the closed off and lonely person that Draco Malfoy had become.

The months passed and the nursery was ready. Hermione was more than ready. She couldn't wait to have her body back. She'd agreed with Ginny that Ginny would help when the time was right. Ginny

didn't really have any experience but neither did anyone else. Luckily, things just happened on their own. It was just that nobody really knew what to do if things went wrong.

Draco was still one of the best medics, but his experience and training was more with battle wounds than childbirth.

Hermione felt little cramps as she was waking up. It was about the right time, but she didn't know for sure and her belly was doing all sorts of things. But after lying watching the dawn for a little while she conceded that there was a pattern in her little cramps. Draco was still sleeping.

He was incredibly beautiful when he slept. They had been sleeping in the same bed for a few months now. She was so used to him being there. She was still madly in love with him, maybe even more so now that she saw his insecurity and vulnerability. She could see through his defences now, they were still there, but she could see what he was protecting.

She kissed him and he twitched in his sleep but didn't wake up. It really was a new day, she thought. Things would change forever today. They would be a true family. Mother, father and baby. It was still such a strange thought, but the baby was ready to come out.

She dreaded what the day held for her, but was also in awe of the eventual outcome. It didn't hurt much yet, just regular little stomach clamps strong enough to let her know they were there.

She didn't wake Draco, it was nice to lay in bed and just relax for a little while. Who knew when she'd get the chance again. And she didn't often just get the chance to observe Draco. She was never really sure of what was going on behind those grey eyes. He didn't often say what he felt or what he wanted, so you had to judge by his actions, and the one thing she knew was that he didn't fight her being there every night, and that he had orchestrated having her in his life to begin with.

But she still didn't know how he felt about her, which meant that she didn't quite know how things would be between them tomorrow. With an heir in place, were they finished with whatever this was? She wasn't sure she was prepared for that, because the one true thing when it came to him was that she wanted him. She'd fought it, tried to rationalise it away, but it refused to budge.

She decided to have a bath, she might not get a chance again later. She snuck out of bed and quietly made her way into the bathroom, where she sat and watched her stomach while the bath filled. The bump would be gone soon and she would have her body back.

She lay in the bath and enjoyed the warm water, letting it sooth her. She was going to be in pain soon and it would take hours. She had of course read every book she could get her hands on. If she had very good luck, this might take less than ten hours, but it could be much, much more.

"What are you doing up?" She heard a sleep roughened voice from the door.

"Having a bath."

"At the crack of dawn?"

"Might not get a chance later."

There was a pause. "Has it started?"

"I think so." She said.

"Alright then." He said. "I'll have the elf bring you something to eat."

He left her to her bathing. She was in no rush to get out. Its not like she had anywhere to be. When her fingers were nice and pruny, she got out.

"Eat." He said when she walked back into the bedroom. "You'll need your strength."

She ate and got back in bed. The cramps were getting a bit stronger. He didn't leave for which she was grateful. He sat in a chair and read some documents.

After a while of lying in bed, they got stronger. Hermione decided to get up and walk around for a bit. Lying in bed doing nothing was really frustrating.

Draco walked with her as they wandered around the house in silence. She had to stop now when a cramp happened, but after a consistent set of time it passed. They went back to the bedroom and she tried to read, but her mind just didn't seem to want to focus. Lunch came and went.

"It really hurts." Hermione said. "I knew that it would, but it really hurts."

"Do you need some potion?" Draco said.

"Not yet, but probably soon." Hermione said feeling a bit distressed. "There's still hours to go, isn't there?"

"Yes." Draco said and returned to the papers.

Hermione felt really annoyed that he had something to do. A bit irrationally she knew, but she was still really annoyed.

After pacing for a while, the cramps got really painful. A new level of painful. She wasn't going to be able to stay upright for much longer, and she wasn't even close to being finished. She had to get back into bed. The pain was wearing on her.

"We're going to have to name the baby." Hermione said.

"I like Hyperion." Draco said.

"Hyperion? Sounds like a galaxy cruiser."

"A what?"

"Never mind." Hermione said between gritted teeth. "Not sure I really see my child named Hyperion."

"How about Lucius?"

"Did I mention that your father tried to murder me in fifth year?"

"It's a good name."

"Surely we can come up with something we can both agree on."

"We tend to have family names." Draco said.

"How about Jonathan?" Hermione said. "Provided it's a boy."

"It's a boy."

"You seem very confident."

"He's a Malfoy, he's a boy. And muggle names are out of the question. Abraxas or Septimus."

Hermione wasn't convinced. They all sounded so brutal.

"I suppose I could stretch to Cygnus. It's a Black name, but I always rather liked it."

"It's ok, I guess." Hermione said, because it was much more normal than any of the Malfoy names. "I'm going to need some potion soon."

"There still a long way to go." Draco said. "I've sent a note to Weasley, so she is ready when the time comes."

Hermione had some potion which took off the absolute raw edge of the pain. It was still very painful and Hermione was getting tired.

"Try to conserve your energy." Draco said.

"How exactly?" Hermione demanded. "Should I just take a time out? I have no control here, I'm just along for the ride."

"Shall I get Weasley?" Draco asked.

"No. There's nothing for her to do. Its not time yet."

"Just thought you'd like some company."

She didn't want anyone other than him there.

"It still hurts."

"I can't give you anything stronger."

Hermione just couldn't get comfortable and had to eventually give up on the idea that there was a position that would make her comfortable.

"The contractions are getting closer now." Draco said. "Its progressing."

"Apparently I will want to push when its time."

Draco joined her on the bed and they lay face to face.

"This is not fun." Hermione said.

Draco stroked a stray hair away from her face. "Nothing can be done about it now."

"The muggles have better ways of dealing with this. They can take the pain away."

"Well, they're not there anymore."

Hermione wanted to hurt him. Share some of the pain. But she was also grateful that he was there, that she didn't have to go through this alone.

"Why did you pick me?" She asked, suddenly needing to know. "Tell me, you owe me that. Why did you pick me?"

He looked away.

"Don't." She said when he was refusing her his eyes. "I need to know."

"Because I wanted you."

It was a simple statement, and she wasn't entirely sure what the implications were, but it meant something to her. It meant that this wasn't an entire fluke and there was some feeling behind it.

She leant in and kissed him, but broke it off as another contraction assaulted her.

"I love you." She said after the contraction subsided.

He mumbled something unintelligible, but she got the sentiment and smiled.

They stayed on the bed facing each other for what seemed like an eternity.

"You're beautiful when you're in pain." He said after a while.

"Well, that's great to know." She said furiously. She wasn't really furious at him, just furious in general.

Soon the contractions became absolutely unbearable.

"I'll get the Weasel girl." Draco said and left.

She didn't know where he'd gone and she felt distressed and abandoned. Before she really knew what had happened Ginny was there.

Hermione wasn't sure whether she greeted Ginny or not. Ginny was telling her to push and Hermione wanted to whack her. People died doing this. They used to all the time, and they were pretty much back to that now. But she pushed and pushed, and then he was there, a cry like a little kitten. Nothing existed other than that sound. She saw Draco holding a little bundle, the source of the little kitten cries.

"You should sleep now." Ginny said to her. "Drink this."

"Wha..?" Hermione said, not really able to focus. There was a potion being poured in her mouth and everything went black.

Chapter 39

Chapter 39

Hermione's eyes shot open when her brain finally managed to connect the sounds she was hearing with the fact that there was a baby nearby. Her baby in fact.

The little creature was lying next to her on the bed, between her and Draco.

"He's hungry." Draco said.

"It's a boy."

"Yes."

"She knocked me out." Hermione complained.

"You needed sleep."

But the little creature distracted her from telling him off. The finest soft blond hair, and the tiniest fingers she'd ever seen. She picked him up and just held him.

"He's hungry." Draco repeated.

Which meant that Hermione had to feed him. She felt awkward doing it, and awkward doing it in front of Draco, but she soon lost concern about anything other than the little baby in her arms.

Hermione didn't notice that Draco left after a while. She spent hours with her baby. The little elf brought food, and then more food, and then food again. Hours had obviously passed. The baby ate and slept, and she had to change him. A cycle that repeated and Hermione stayed put throughout and even watched him sleep.

He really was the cutest thing on the planet. And he smelled absolutely divine. She just couldn't tear herself away from him.

Neither she nor the baby left her room. She didn't know how long it had been. Time blurred. It was either day or night outside, but it made little difference. Draco popped in once in a while. Even Harry, Ginny, Ron and Pansy came by to say hello to the new addition. They came, they went.

Hermione was a mess. Her mood was all over the place, but in essence she was happy. Exhausted beyond reason, but endlessly fascinated by the little creature that was her baby.

She stayed secluded for a few weeks. It passed really quickly and they did manage to get a routine going. Hermione started to leave her room again, starting with dinner downstairs as the baby slept. When she felt stronger, she and the baby ventured outside. A little bit every day. She went to Harry's house one day. A walk down Diagon Alley the next.

Cyngus slept in the basket she carried. He seemed to sleep well when being carted around. Everyone seemed to like seeing a baby. Draco seemed to accept that she could take care of the baby and that they weren't in immediate danger if they went to Diagon Alley, but he insisted on knowing where they were at all times.

Mostly she didn't see that much of Draco. He was rarely home. They ate together in the evenings, but they spent the nights apart again. Her body wasn't up to a physical relationship yet, so it was for the best.

Hermione made lunch dates with people. There was a pub open in Diagon Alley and Hermione decided that she was doing the world a favour if she started spending some of Malfoy's money. It would support the community, so she invited people to lunch.

Today was Neville, he snuck away from Hogwarts.

"I always used to appreciate Hogwarts food, but the quality has gone down significantly." Neville said. "Although better now that muggles are helping."

"There's muggles working the fields?"

"Why do you think Lupin was so keen on getting you out of the castle." Neville said.

"It wasn't just me." Hermione said, not comfortable with this conversation or the fact that people had just ended up taking the path of least resistance and used the desperation of the muggles to serve their own needs. But she couldn't really say anything, she knew that Draco used muggles. She knew there even were some in the manor, but she never saw them.

"So the food is improving, but it will be nice to have a proper meal." Neville said. "Now we just have all the other problems to worry about."

"Like what?"

"Well, we don't have any books." Neville said. "While not everyone appreciates that as a problem, I know you would see the issue. We've just flat run out of books. We are doing our best to reuse old books, but books are scattered far and wide, and most people have bigger problems than looking for old school books."

"Surely there must be some left over at Flourish and Blotts." Hermione said.

"Most have been taken already." He said. "Mr. Caulderville hadn't started next year's production when he...disappeared, so there was previous little stock available to begin with."

"Surely it wouldn't be that hard to print more." Hermione said. "I hear Millicent Bulstrode has taken over the Daily Prophet and they're managing to print an edition every few weeks."

"Maybe we can put a petition in for them to help." Neville said. "It doesn't matter, we can make do."

They finished their lunch and Neville told her about the going ons at the school. It was starting to resemble more of a school, although it was still the centre for child care for many of the younger children. Luna had taken up work dealing with the young children and she was a natural at it apparently.

They said goodbye and promised to do it again in a few weeks. Neville floo'd back to the school and Hermione walked out of the pub down Diagon Alley. She walked towards Flourish and Blotts, and looked upon its façade that looked suspended in time. The windows were dark, it hadn't been open since the Great Incident. People had nowhere to buy books. While she knew that people were busy just surviving, but if they were ever going to get back to some semblance of normal, they needed a bookstore. She wondered who owned it, and why they weren't doing anything about it.

Hermione suspected that she had just found her project. Something she could fix. She needed something worthwhile to turn her mind to. Taking care of Cygnus was lovely, but it didn't exactly engage her mind. She needed something to think about. She wasn't a hormonally disturbed whale paddling around of painful joints anymore, she was ready to take something on.

She walked back to the pub and floo'd home holding her precious basket close.

She discussed Flourish and Blotts with Draco. He was pretty sure it was now owned by Tracey Davis, as she was related to the Cauldervilles. He said he would ask what her plans were for it and the printing operation behind it.

Hermione was getting pretty excited about the idea. She loved books, that was never a secret and sooner or later, this society would need books again. They were never going to get things right if they didn't have an evolving storage of knowledge.

Draco presented her with the deeds to Flourish and Blotts a few days later. She jumped up and down with excitement and kissed him on the cheek for getting it to her. She was going to get the book publishing industry going.

Now she and Cyngus had something meaty to set their minds on. Actually, he didn't care. He just ate and slept, and occasionally played with a set of keys. He didn't care about toys, but the keys held endless fascination, particularly when they made noise.

It was strange to think that she'd ever had a life without him, he was just a part of her. And it was equally strange that she owned Flourish and Blotts. The one store she admired above all else. A place she had always seen with complete wonder. And now it was hers.

She obviously couldn't work in the store with Cygnus. That just wouldn't work, but more importantly was getting the printer working. Then she would be the magical world's publishing industry. Maybe the only functional publishing industry in the world. She would read through all the work people wanted published and make decisions on which she would publish.

Obviously she would have to be fair, she decided. She would still have to publish some of the crap that people liked to read. The important thing was to get people reading. She could publish children's literature as well. She was beside herself with excitement.

She told Draco of all her plans. He listened but he wasn't quite as enthusiastic. He pretty much let her to what she wanted and told her she could have whatever funding she required to get it off the ground. Zabini could organise any funds she wanted.

She tracked down the dingy back alley printing shop that supported the Flourish and Blotts organisation. It was dark and grimy. The equipment must be centuries old. It ran completely on magic, not an electric piece of equipment in sight, which she guessed was lucky because there was none available. She had no idea how to run it. There was no manual, or any other set of directions for the machine.

This was a bit of a set back. There was no one who knew how this machine worked, but maybe the Daily Prophet machines would provide some hints. Someone obviously knew how to work their machines. It was going to take some time to work it out. Hopefully it wasn't completely impossible.

For the first time in a long time, she felt completely excited about the future. Things were perfect.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40

Mechanics wasn't Hermione's forte, which meant that she only got so far with unravelling the puzzle that was the Flourish and Blott's printer. Mechanics was a bit of a specialist field within the magical world. Most wizards depended on pure magic, the intersection of machines and magic was a field onto itself.

The answer came one day in the form of a motorcycle riding Colin Creevey. He was skinny and drawn, but he had an impressive muggle motorcycle that he'd converted to function by magic.

It didn't take him long to agree to take a look at the printer. They agreed that they'd meet the next day.

Hermione was excited. She would of course pay Colin for his time, which from the looks of it would be helpful for him.

"The muggle world is a mess." He said when they met the next day. "At least the ammunition's run out, so it's a bit safer now."

"Do you go into the muggle world a lot?" Hermione asked.

"On occasion." He said. "You can trade with them. Its actually easier to trade with muggles than it is to get anything in the wizard world. Mainly because they barter, and in the wizard world its all about Galleons. And they are hard to come by."

"It will get easier, I'm sure of it." She said, and she was pretty sure she might need Colin to manage the machine if they succeeded in fixing it, but she didn't want to commit to it until she knew she could offer it.

Colin went to work, identifying gears, actuators and whatzits. Hermione and Cyngus mainly sat and watched. She would help if he

needed a hand, but there was precious little she could add other than her hands.

Actually the most useful thing she managed all morning was to go and buy some sandwiches off one of the street vendors. She hated feeling useless, but the end result was worth it.

"Dean is trading wood with the muggles." Colin said. "As its getting closer to winter, the muggles are getting desperate for wood. They can't access the magical forests, so Dean is selling wood. You can't tell anyone, because the Ministry would have a fit if they found out."

"He needs to be very careful." Hermione said.

"Its hard because some of the work out there, the muggles will do for room and board." Colin said.

"Well, this place could use a clean if he's up to it." Hermione said. She had intended on doing it herself, but she certainly had money to pay someone to do it, and from the sounds of it, Dean could use the money.

"I'll let him know."

Dean joined them the next day. Hermione helped clean the place, which obviously hadn't been cleaned in at least a century. She didn't know how anyone could put up with the grime but they had. She would have Dean help dust Flourish and Blott's shop space after, but getting the printery clean would take a while.

Everyone seemed quite happy with their tasks, so Hermione took Cyngus and started going through the stacks of papers in the Flourish and Blott's office. Cyngus didn't mind the change, he slept just as well in the noise as he did in the quiet. And by stacks, they lined the walls all the way to the ceiling. She realised it was unpublished manuscripts. She would have to go through them to see if there was anything worth printing, maybe hire a space to store the ones that weren't. Although first in line for printing was the Hogwarts

text re-runs. Those manuscripts were at the Ministry, and she had to lodge a petition to have them delivered when the printer was running.

It was good to have her days occupied. It was good to be away from Malfoy Manor as it was so far removed from everything that was going on in the world.

Her relationship with Draco had suffered a bit. They weren't as close as they were before Cyngus was born. Draco would spend time with Cyngus as he got home from work, and frankly, Hermione needed the break. But Cyngus needed so much of her attention, she had little time to deal with Draco.

She missed him though. She missed the sex and the intimacy. She felt like he was slipping away from her. He was withdrawn and if she let up the pressure he would just slip away. She would have to draw him back, even though she felt too exhausted to pursue a physical relationship.

It had been months since they'd last been together. They slept in different rooms as Hermione needed to be near Cyngus.

She decided that she needed to set things right, because if she didn't, they might just keep going this way. Or worse.

She decided it was time she sought him out and she found him in his study. He was pouring a whiskey for himself.

"Do you want one?" He said without turning around.

"No." She said. She walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. It felt really good. He was warm under the white shirt. Not to mention familiar. "I miss you."

He didn't move, just let her touch him.

"I want us to be together again." She said placing her chin on the space between his shoulder blades.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She said, not sure why he was asking.

"Why?"

"Because we're family now." She said. "You're my husband, I'm your wife, and Cyngus is our baby. Isn't this how things should be?"

He turned around in her embrace. She had to look up at him as he was taller. It felt very nice to melt into the front of him and she smiled.

"Trust me." She said. "You can, you know."

He looked like there was something conflicted in him.

"I want to." He said quietly. Finally he slowly leaned down and kissed her. Hermione felt heat fill her, she still wanted him, there was no doubt. She could feel the want in him too. She felt the tension form in his body and the atmosphere shifted.

They seemed to both feel a sense of urgency to get clothes off. She wanted to feel his skin, against hers. All thoughts of exhaustion were gone. She tugged his shirt over his head and he let her. She ran her hands across the smooth skin of his chest and abdomen.

He lifted her up on the side table of the study and she wrapped her legs around him, drawing him close. She felt completely molten inside, filled with tension and adrenalin so her hands trembled.

They kissed again. Deeper and more demanding this time. How could she have gone without this, she wondered.

His hands pushed her skirt up her thighs and were freeing her from her panties. She couldn't tolerate any teasing or delays tonight, she

needed him right away.

She gasped as he entered her and clasped him even closer. It stung a bit with soreness, but the sensation was completely overridden by an all encompassing need.

She loved him so completely, she realised. Even though he was messed up, so far from perfect, she adored him including his faults. Maybe the potential had always been there, maybe that's why she'd reacted so strongly to him throughout school. Maybe part of her knew that this was how it was supposed to be.

Hard thrusts had her riding the front of a wave of sensation that was threatening to overtake her. She didn't want to give in yet, she wanted this to last forever. She fought, but the sensation was relentless and it claimed her willing or not.

It took everything out of her. They were both spent and dishevelled. That might be one of the fastest intimacies they'd ever had.

He was stroking her brow as they caught their breath again.

"Don't ever give me cause to not trust you." He said.

"I won't." She confirmed. "When have you ever known me not to hang on until the bitter end?"

He smiled and kissed her again. More gently this time.

She felt like all doubt was gone. This was her family and she was lucky to have them. She still wasn't ready to let him go so she followed him to the sofa in front of the fire and snuggled her head into his shoulder letting the comfort and the warmth sooth her.

"We're going to be fine." She said.

He was playing with her fingers and sipped his whiskey.

"How is the publishing business?" He asked after a while of contemplation.

Hermione told him about her troubles and headway. He seemed willing to listen to the details, which was nice, because it wasn't something she was getting anywhere else.

"I think it makes a difference hiring people." She said. "Its going to strengthen the whole community, and get things done faster."

"Hire as many as you want then." Draco said. "If you can find something for them to do."

"I might hire some readers for the manuscripts. There are years worth of unpublished manuscripts. It would be nice to put a call out for new material. Maybe people are interested in reading and engaging with the new reality rather than what life used to be like. I'm not sure if we're ever going to get back to that.

"It will take time anyway." Draco said. "In the meantime, I will have a look at the paper supply for you. You're stocks won't last long once you start printing."

She followed him up to his bedroom that night. The first time in a long time, and she swore she would be with him every night from then on. Cyngus had started sleeping through the night and the little elf was more than happy to monitor the nursery at night. Hermione set up a cosy little bed for him, so he could sleep there if he wanted to.

She was claiming her family again, and she wasn't going to let her various distractions or his discomfort with vulnerability side track them.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41

Colin got the printer working and Dean got Flourish and Blott in ship shape. They opened the doors in early spring and the reception was quite good. Sales weren't great, there were more people browsing than actually buying, but Hermione didn't mind. It wasn't like there was a roaring economy going, but there were signs of improvement.

Most people only had money for food, but the illusion of normalcy was important. Draco didn't exactly go in for charity, but she found that he would agree to her starting businesses and employing people, even if they ran at a loss for a little while.

She didn't end up having a great deal of time for reading manuscripts as Cygnus took up much of her time. Well, she chose to spend time with him. But that choice meant that she had to hire a couple of girls to read through and catalogue all the manuscripts in the Flourish and Blott's office. Things progressed quite nicely and she didn't even need to be there most of the time.

She hadn't anticipated how much she needed to spend time with Cygnus. He was pulling himself up to standing now and exploring anything he could get his hands on. He was a curious little thing, and a happy little boy. His had the shape of her eyes, but the colour was Draco's, along with his white blond hair. There was no doubt that he was a Malfoy, but Hermione was going to make sure that he grew up with love and happiness, which was part of the reason she insisted on being with him as much as possible.

She still did her best to get out there and spend Draco's money, the more she spent, the more there was going around. She'd even agreed to fund Parvati and Padma's clothing store. It was a good idea, they would need a group of people to supply the store and

many of the people with money were more likely to spend it on frivolous stuff like clothes. Hermione bankrolled the entire operation.

The new clothing shop became a bit of a hangout for girls and the gossip was rife.

Lavender wanted to open a French Patisserie and came to her as well. Hermione hadn't been aware that Lavender knew how to cook, let alone delicate morsels like she seemed to be capable of. Hermione agreed to bankroll that operation too.

Over time more people got employment and there were more temptations for the money that was around. The pubs down Diagon Alley slowly become a little more lively and Hermione felt proud of herself. There were even more regular editions of the Daily Prophet and the stories were mostly good. Hermione even organised the Patil twins to have a fashion column in it to appeal to the part of society that revelled in that kind of thing.

Another first came when Draco decided it was time for a party. Hermione wasn't over the moon about the idea but he insisted. They had to get back to normalcy, he argued and Hermione was pretty sure he was pushing her buttons to get her to agree. It also became clear that it was predominantly a Slytherin party although she was welcome to invite whoever she wanted.

Part of her wanted to invite everyone she knew, but Hermione was aware that Draco didn't want to invite every riff raff in the country. With all the distraction and the business building, they hadn't really addressed their differing view on social issues and responsibility, they had just acknowledged that they disagreed. To some degree, Draco was still staying with the old view of the world.

Hermione did invite Harry, Ron, Neville, and the Patil girls, including partners. Only Neville, Pansy and the Patil girls accepted. Hermione felt a bit hurt and she restrained herself from apparating over to Harry and Ron straight away and telling them off for not trying to build social cohesion. She had to acknowledge on the other hand

that if she hadn't been married to Draco there was no way she'd agree to go to this party either.

Hermione bought a new set of robes for the party. Actually she had Padma send something over. Padma had good taste and would probably pick something better than Hermione would after a period of frustration and eventual realisation that she just had to pick one.

Having Padma pick something was the right chose, she sent over this blue dress that Hermione wouldn't have picked in a million years, but looked really stunning. She looked grown up, actually. She wasn't used to the idea of being a grown up, although in real life there was little opportunity to do teenage things anymore.

There were some early arrivers when she got downstairs. Somehow Malfoy had managed to supply some musicians, no one she recognised so they must have been muggles or foreign. There was lots of serving staff as well. Hermione didn't know where they came from.

"Oh, you're here." A familiar but not well acquainted girl from Ravenclaw said. "Draco is over there greeting, you should join him."

"Huh?" Hermione said being a bit flummoxed that she was being ordered around by a practical stranger.

"Finger food is coming in now and we have a toast in 45 minutes." The girl continued and shooed Hermione towards Draco who was standing in the entrance way.

Hermione couldn't really think of anything to do other than comply.

"Who is that girl?" Hermione asked when she took her place next to Draco.

"Who?" Draco asked and shook hands with some guest.

Hermione pointed her out.

"That's Isobel, my secretary."

"You have a secretary?" Hermione asked with surprise.

"Of course. I do have an inordinate amount of correspondence and such that needs management. She's quite good. Ravenclaw." He said and leaned over to her. "They make good secretaries."

Hermione recognised the put down. She still wasn't excited about the idea of a pretty girl spending lots of time with him. She felt jealous. It took her by surprise, but the girl was really pretty. And she obviously liked clothes that were just a little bit too tight.

"She organised the evening." He continued. "How's Cyg?"

"Snug in bed." Hermione said. "Horrace is watching him." Horrace being the young elf, who after much deliberation had decided to change his name to something much more regal and manly from his birthname of Petal. Even Hermione had to agree that Petal could be challenging for a young elf trying to find his identity in a new world. Hermione liked Petal though, it suited the sweet and kind elf.

"Nott." Draco said to the new guest with a nod. Nott made his greetings and moved into the party.

"You invited him?" Hermione asked with more surprise.

"Yes."

"He attacked and imprisoned you."

"Don't worry, he is being punished."

"With canapés and Champaign? You have some interesting punishment techniques."

"He is my dog now." Draco said with a sly smile.

Hermione decided that she didn't perhaps want to know more. Nott did kind of deserve whatever Draco was dishing out, and it seemed to be fairly civilised.

Neville and Pansy arrived and Hermione sighed with relief. There would be someone at the party she could talk to and she sought them out as soon as her greeting duties were over.

Neville was there representing the school and soon found meaningful discussion on what education should be like in this new world.

"Ron didn't want to come." Pansy said.

"He told me." Hermione said. "So you're on good terms with the Slytherins again?"

"It seems so. I'm on good terms with Draco now, so that means the rest as well."

"Even Nott seems to be on good terms. I'm surprised to see him here."

"I'm not." Pansy said.

"I wouldn't have figured they'd be friends after what happened."

"They're not." Pansy said. "I try not to get involved, but I'm sure Nott has had his wings clipped in some way."

"I will never understand Slytherin politics."

"No." Pansy said. "Anyways, Ron and Harry are working for the Ministry mostly now. There isn't all that much to do, but small things. Thieves mostly. The odd werewolf still causing problems, but they are being sorted as necessary."

"They need something to do. Harry can't redecorate his house forever."

"And Ron is really happy to be the income provider. Being a kept man doesn't agree with him. He absolutely refused to accept money from me."

"He is particularly prideful when it comes to money." Hermione said.

"Belby's here." Pansy said and they watched as the Minister of Magic made his way across the room. "There are lots of people who aren't very happy with him. He's causing waves. It wouldn't surprise me if his reign is coming to an end soon."

"But things are going well." Hermione said. "We have some issues, but things are progressing nicely."

"I'm not sure if these things are always about the greater good." Pansy said darkly, but switched tact. "But the Patel store is a beacon in the dark, you should be proud."

"I didn't really do anything, but it seems nothing is right in the world until people can revel in absolute girliness."

"It is a necessary evil." Pansy confirmed. "They're doing well though."

"I didn't expect them to do so well, but they are selling. They're actually having trouble keeping up with demand."

"Things can't be that bad if the stores can't keep up with the latest fashion."

"Fashion makes the world go round, I guess." Hermione said with lack of enthusiasm.

Chapter 42

Chapter 42

Hermione lay in bed with Draco, just being cosy after more strenuous morning activities. They heard the patter of unsteady feet racing their way. Cygnus was walking now, but walking was a misnomer, it was more the unsteady running wobble of a drunk, but it got him where he wanted to go.

He pushed the bedroom door open and continued his trek to the bed where he reached up his arms and waited to be lifted up. His hair was a mess from sleeping.

Hermione pulled him up on the bed where he tried to stand and balance, walking over their legs. Draco tickled him until he fell over again, laughing from being tickled. There was no particular rush to get up on anyone's part.

"He is so happy." Draco said. "All he wants is you, me and him together playing tickling games in bed. His life is so simple."

"Maybe in the end that's all we really need." She responded as Cygnus squashed her leg as he fell over. "Maybe we just make things more complicated than they really need to be. He is getting so independent now, I don't get nearly the cuddles I used to."

"There's a whole world to explore. He can't be held back by this mother's apron string forever."

"He is barely a toddler, I'm pretty sure he's not ready to without me just yet. But I guess it's a world that is exciting and full of only good things as far as he knows." Hermione said. "I used to be that way. Even when I started at Hogwarts, the world was full of promises and wonder. I only saw good in the world." Until ironically it was the

person currently lying next to her that clued her into the fact that the world wasn't all goodness and innocent wonder.

"I don't think I ever really had that." Draco said with Cygnus in his lap letting him play with Draco's wand. "You were incredibly naïve. And you watch where you point that."

"Well, there is something to be said for naivety. Surely innocence is to be protected."

"The point is that it needs to be protected." Draco said turning Cygnus upside down to great delight. "Someone needs to keep the dark things from the door."

Hermione lay down on her side and watched them play, her two blonde boys. She knew what lengths she'd go to protect them.

Hermione was met with chaos when she arrived at Flourish and Blotts the next morning. The large shop window was broken and there was glass everywhere.

"What happened?" She asked Dean as she pushed her way in the door.

"Someone broke the window." Dean said. "It was like this when I arrived. We've lost a bit of stock too."

"You mean we've been burgled?" Hermione said. Books were rarely the object of crime, so it wasn't something she had ever considered happening.

"I don't know." Dean said. "It looks like someone threw a brick at the window. It might not be the person who took the books."

"Still, why would someone take books, its pretty well know that I will lend if someone can't afford to buy."

"I don't know." Dean said sweeping up glass from the floor.

Hermione got a feeling there was something that Dean wasn't saying. Hermione knew there was discontent, the world had fallen apart and it was affecting people differently, and some were faring better than others. Recovering was a process and it had to work itself through, even when it was painful. Pretty hard to tell someone when they couldn't afford buying a simple book. But they had to start somewhere.

She helped out with the cleaning and then decided to go talk to Harry about it. Harry should know that someone had stolen from the shop or just aimed for a bit of destruction whichever it was.

She found Harry in his office at the Enforcement Department of the Ministry. She walked in and sat down.

"I just got to finish this off, can you wait a minute?" Harry said furiously scribbling.

"Sure." Hermione said. "But, for once I am here on official matters."

"Oh?"

"Someone broke into the shop. Broke the window."

"Really?" Harry said and paused. Then started scribbling again.

"Anything taken?"

"Some books."

Hermione sat back and waited while Harry finished. She noticed that there was a little commotion going on outside. Harry didn't take any notice at all. She got up and walked to the window that was facing the foyer. There were people gathered in groups talking. One or two carrying their possessions in boxes.

"What's going on?" She said when she realised something is going in.

"Belby's quit." Harry said.

"Quit?" Hermione repeated the news that took her by surprised. "

"Although many suspect there's a bit of a coup in the background."

"Who's the new Minister?"

"Nott."

"Theo Nott?" Hermione said and she couldn't have been more astounded.

"You didn't know about this?" Harry said watching her.

"No."

Hermione tried to understand the implications of it. Draco had to be involved. Draco had pretty much stated that he controlled Nott. Part of Nott's punishment.

"Admittedly, Belby was a bit of an idiot." Harry said. "But..."

"But what?"

"I don't know." Harry said. "It's just disruptive. Maybe things will get better with Nott. Who knows."

Hermione knew that Harry's concerns ran deeper, but he had nothing concrete or he would be spitting tacks.

"Maybe your window was the result of someone's anger." He said after a while.

"Yeah, but why attack me?"

"Maybe it was just a random window and it happened to be yours."

Hermione turned back and watched the groups of people mingling in the foyer.

"I don't know." Harry continued. "People lost confidence in Belby and he just didn't have enough support anymore."

"Maybe things will get better." She said hoping what she was saying was true. "Uncertainty is just not helpful at the moment. We're making real progress getting things working again."

Harry finished his scribbling and they went to lunch.

"Ginny's pregnant." Harry said as they waited for the elevator.

"Harry!" Hermione said and hugged him. "Congratulations. This is unbelievable, the best possible news."

Harry blushed. He was very happy and it was obvious by looking at him that he was over the moon.

"I guess you can't give up on your redecorating activities just yet then." Hermione teased.

"No, a whole new wave of redecorating starts now." Harry said. "I thought I was done, but no."

"I'm so excited for you." Hermione said. "And Cygnus will have a playmate to get up to all sorts of mischief with."

"I dread to think."

After lunch Hermione returned home and tried to think through the implications of what was happening at the Ministry. She was playing with Cygnus who had just woken up from his nap.

She wanted to talk to Draco, but she wasn't sure where he was, and calling him during work was not something she did. She would wait until he got home.

He arrived shortly before six like he did every night. He was in his study for a while before dinner like he did every night.

"What's going on at the Ministry?" Hermione asked.

"Belby quit." He answered. "Nott has taken over for now."

"Are you sure it's a good idea that Nott is Minister?" Hermione said. "He attacked and imprisoned you as I recall."

"Are you worried about me?" He said with a mischievous grin.

No amount of gorgeous grins was going to push her out of her interrogation, but it tugged at her insides.

"I just don't want a repeat of that." She said. "And with Nott in a position of power, I worry."

"There is nothing to worry about." Draco said. "Nott would not move against me, or us. I have made sure of that."

"How?"

"By making sure there are very detrimental consequences if he steps out of line." Draco said and came around to pull her to him. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you or Cygnus, I promise."

"Someone broke my window at Flourish and Blotts this morning."

"Did anyone see who it was?" He said.

"No, it was before we opened."

"I'll have someone enchant the window." Draco said. "Make it unbreakable."

He kissed her and she let him. It was so good to be enveloped in his arms, to feel his warmth and solidity. She also felt that he wanted her

and it sent a fissure of excitement through her. Just him looking at her seemed to achieve that nowadays.

"Is everything alright?" She asked when the kiss ended.

"Everything is fine. A bit of flux but everything will be fine. Things will be better." Draco said.

Hermione tucked her head in under his chin and listened to his heartbeat. It was steady and strong.

"Is there anything I can do?" She asked.

"No, there is nothing to worry about." He said. "Just a bit of reshuffling. Things will be back to normal in days. Now that Belby and his ridiculous incompetence is gone, things will improve. Nott will behave. How are things going with your Patisserie business?"

Hermione told him about the sales and the clientele. Lavender seemed to be blossoming in the business and the clientele kept growing. There were signs that business was slowly growing beyond the spoilt rich girls from Ravenclaw and Slytherin.

"Good." He said. "Now I need to do a bit of work, I'll see you at dinner."

Hermione left him to it and wandered towards the nursery. There was a copy of the latest Daily Prophet on one of the side tables. A large picture of a chuffed looking Nott was on the cover. She read the article which proposed near unanimous support for the change at the Ministry citing Belby's inability to control the Ministry resulting in infighting and constant delays. Nott would apparently push through some important reforms that would strengthen the recovering wizarding world.

She hadn't realised Belby was so incompetent. Harry did seem to indicate that he didn't have the upmost regard for him. Maybe this change was for the better, she thought and put the paper down.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43

Draco made good on getting the window at Flourish and Blotts break proof. Obviously, they had to try every way they could think of, but it held. She secretly revelled in the idea that Draco took care of her.

She also spent some time with Ginny, who was not feeling the joy of pregnancy above the violent nausea. Most of the time they just ended up sitting on the floor in the bathroom as Ginny couldn't keep anything down.

"I hate this." Harry said as Hermione left Ginny to brush her teeth. "There is nothing I can do to fix this. I feel useless."

"It will pass, Harry." Hermione assured him. "And then there are all sorts of pain and discomfort to look forward to after this." She said and clapped him on the back. "It is a miracle that we like you so much."

"Why did we do this again?"

"Because its worth it and everything worth it takes effort and sometimes downright suffering." She said and thought of Draco.

"Ron is miserable as well, he broke his wand. He's had to take Arthur's old wand, but they're not getting on, but he has no choice."

"Maybe we need to collect all the old wands together so people can pick something suitable." Hermione said.

"Or make new ones." Harry said. "All those young kids at Hogwarts are going to need one soon."

"Surely someone can make a wand." Hermione said, starting to think about what would be involved.

"It's a specialised field."

"Someone must have aptitude for it." Hermione said. "We're not going to get by if we can't make wands. I will find some books."

"Is every answer in a book?" Harry asked.

"I have found that mostly they are." She said. "But its me you're talking to. Anyways, how's work with the new Minister."

"Different." Harry said. "Interesting, I guess. A different culture from Belby. Nott is getting rid of some of Belby's cronies, which is also getting rid of some of the sense of entitlement. I suspect that is for the better."

Hermione kept on thinking about wands and their production. It was something they needed and she had the resources to get it going. Her other businesses were surviving, Lavender's Patisserie was even thriving by some standards.

Ollivander's Wand Shop was still a burnt out shell with most of his stock burned, but there wasn't any reason why they couldn't resurrect it. She wondered who owned the property. Maybe she should make some enquiries.

She felt the thrill of having another project. They weren't massive undertakings but they were slowly returning normalcy to the wizarding world and maybe that was worth more than grand designs.

She set her analytical mind to it and after asking around, it was clear that Ollivander had one living relative, Wayne Hopkins. She hadn't seen him since they were at Hogwarts and he wasn't easy to track, but she managed in the end.

She sought him out in his family home on the east coast, near absolutely nothing. The garden and the house were a little unkempt which wasn't surprising considering how enthusiastic teenage boys were about gardening.

"Yeah, I can make wands." He said when she asked him. "And I have when people have asked me to."

"But if we fix the shop, you can set up properly."

"The shop is a wreck." Wayne said.

"I can help you fix it and get the supplies you need to start production."

"I don't want your money." He said with an unapologetic shrug. "Look if someone needs a wand they can ask me, but I don't want your money and I don't want to work for you."

"Oh." Hermione said. His unwillingness to deal with her hadn't been something she anticipated. "I suppose..." She started but not really understanding where his dislike comes from. "I was just trying to help." She said meekly.

With that he said a hasty goodbye and the door closed before Hermione had a chance to finish the conversation. It was certainly not the welcome to her proposal that she'd expected. He must have some dislike for her that she never knew about. It made her wonder what the Hufflepuffs thought about her generally. She couldn't recall ever having any notable run ins with any of them, except that time she accidentally hit Susan Bones with a Reducto hex during training.

It stung a little being brutally rejected, but she supposed he had the right to his feelings. He wasn't opposed to producing one off wands for people, which was something. Maybe there was someone else who were willing to make a bit more of a business of it.

Whatever bad feelings he had, she shrugged it off when she got home. Draco was home early for once and Cygnus was playing in his study.

"We've been invited to an event at Blaise's." Draco said. "Blaise has decided to throw a little birthday party for Daphne." Blaise and Daphne had started seeing each other lately, he'd learned through the Patel twins.

"Ok." Hermione said. "Its not super formal is it?"

"Would Blaise do it any other way?" He said. "Ask the Patel twins, I'm sure they could find something for you, otherwise there must be closets full of formalwear around this place."

Hermione didn't feel comfortable wearing Narcissa Malfoy's clothes. She sent a note to Parvati begging for help.

A shimmery silver dress came a few days later. Hermione appreciated the artistry in the dress, the quality was really good. Those girls had come a long way. She was impressed, more so when she put the dress on. Even she could appreciate the happiness in girliness in a dress like this.

The party occurred a few days later. The only true upside to spending an evening at a formal wizard party was seeing Draco in formal robes. There was no question that he was made for formal wear. He looked like an aspirational black and white photo done by one of the professional muggle advertising agencies.

It wasn't her first party, so she pretty much knew what to expect and what was expected of her. Draco mingled, she could either follow him or do her own thing. There wasn't many people she wanted to talk to, but she had some people she should say hello to, most of these people here were good customers of the Patel twins or Lavenders, a few for the bookshop as well.

"Hermione." Nott said when she was introduced to him.

"Congratulations on your appointment." She said.

"Thank you. Although I hope your congratulations isn't premature as it is one hell of a task. But someone has to do it."

"I am sure you will do an excellent job."

"I will certainly try." He said as a woman slinked her arm around his elbow. "You know Astoria?"

"Of course." Hermione said as she realised that they were a couple. What happened to Lisa Turpin? They were having a child together, now he's with Astoria Greengrass. Where's Lisa?

It would be rude to enquire, so she just smiled tightly and move on. The question wouldn't leave her mind. She didn't get a chance to ask Draco either because they were constantly with people.

"Where is Lisa Turpin?" She asked when they arrived home.

"Who?" He asked.

"The girl Nott was having a baby with."

"Oh, her." He said. "I think she's in Cornwall somewhere. It didn't work out apparently."

"Oh." Hermione said. She couldn't stop the thought that maybe Nott had never intended for it to work out. Although Hermione suspected that Lisa was never remotely in love with Nott, so at least there wasn't a heartbroken girl out there, but she could be completely wrong. It wasn't unusual that relationships didn't work.

It still made her sad. The idea that her relationship with Draco going the same way was even more so. She would be shattered if things didn't work for them. Luckily they seemed to work just fine. The feelings when he touched her only confirmed that.

There was still little better in the world than being in bed with him. He turned her to putty and he knew it. There was also no denying the hunger in his kisses either.

The awkward feeling about Lisa returned the next day. She went over to check on Ginny at lunch like she did most days. Ron was there too, which was nice because she hadn't seen him for a while.

"How is all?" She asked.

"Good." Ron said. "Working. Although they," he said pointing at Ginny, "have given Pansy ideas, she is rearranging the entire house. Its all their fault. I don't get a second to sit down anymore. I don't understand what was so wrong with the Burrow as it was."

"She just needs to make it her own space." Ginny said.

"But Hermione isn't tearing Malfoy Manor apart is she?"

"Merlin forbid." Hermione said.

"Hermione has a toddler to look after, she doesn't have time for decorating."

"Maybe I need to get her pregnant." Ron said.

"You don't get someone pregnant just so you can get out of hanging up wallpaper!" Ginny said with an inordinate amount of anger, before she clamped her hand to her mouth and ran off to the bathroom.

"Not feeling so well, then?" Ron asked.

"No." Hermione said.

"How are things in the Manor?" He said stressing the last word.

"Fine."

"The purebloods are treating you well then?"

"Yes." Hermione said not liking the tone. She wished he'd just be happy with the fact that she'd found happiness with Draco.

"Apparently Wayne Hopkins can make a new wand for you."

"Oh thank Merlin, this wand is bringing me to tears." He said with obvious relief. "I love my father, but his taste in wands..."

"Do you know what happened to Lisa Turpin?" She asked. She felt ashamed that she didn't take Draco's work at complete face value. She just needed some reassurance. "Nothing about her has come across in your department, has it?"

"No. Why?"

"Its just that she isn't with Nott anymore."

"Not like it's a surprise." Ron said. "Wasn't he using her services as a broodmare?"

"Ron!" She chided him for his lack of feeling.

"Well, what else does she deserve?" She said. "She knew what she was getting into. Those pricks using non pureblood girls to bolster their weak genes. Its not like it's a surprise that he would be done with her when he got what he wanted. A broodmare for a pureblood."

"Like me and Draco." Hermione challenged.

He paused for a while, frozen with something unsaid. "Well that's different, isn't it? He married you."

Hermione knew there was more to his thoughts about it than he was voicing. She was angry and hurt. Hurt that he believed in such callousness in other people, or worse, that someone could be so callous to another they were so intimate with. That wasn't her and Draco, of that she was sure.

Chapter 44

Chapter 44

Hermione got an owl at breakfast. A hurriedly scribbled note from Dean saying there had been an incident at Lavender's Patisserie. A bit cryptic, she thought, but also realised Dean was unlikely to send her a note unless he thought it was necessary. She hurriedly finished her breakfast and rushed upstairs to change.

She could smell smoke as soon as she arrived in Diagon Alley. She hoped the smell wasn't related to her incident, but logic dictated that it was likely that it was, and that it was probably going to be bad. Even realising that hadn't prepared her for what she saw. Lavender's shop was completely gutted. A charred hole in the wall really.

Hermione's heart sank when she saw it. It was a complete write off. She stepped inside what used to be the front window, crunching on glass as she did. Debris was littered all over the floor. She knew that Lavender wasn't dealing with the kind of brewing that would result in an accident like this, which meant that there was a distinct possibility that this wasn't an accident.

She heard a sob from somewhere in the black interior. She realised that Lavender must be there somewhere. She found her sitting on the floor with her arms around her knees.

"Why would someone do this?" Lavender asked. Her tears had left marks down her cheeks where it cleared away the soot. "What have I ever done to anyone? Why? I don't understand."

"Neither do I." Hermione said. "This is unconscionable."

"Its completely ruined." Lavender said. "What am I supposed to do?"

"We just have to start again."

"With what?" Lavender said with anger. "Everything is gone."

"It can all be replaced."

"Until what, they do it again?"

"We can't let them win."

Lavender sniffed. "I'm going home."

Hermione nodded. Lavender was angry and heartbroken. And apparently not in the mood for a pep talk.

"I'll get the clean up started." Hermione said quietly as Lavender got up and walked away. "We'll talk later."

Lavender just shrugged and kept walking.

Hermione looked around, she didn't know where to start. She'd never done cleaning on this level.

A noise brought her attention to Dean.

"Quite a mess." He said. "It had happened during the night."

"I should have had it protected. I didn't even think about it, even after someone tried to break the window at Flourish and Blotts. I thought it was a fluke. Why would someone do this? Have I upset someone?"

"You're not the only one." Dean said.

"What do you mean?"

"Its just that this isn't the only act of rebellion, there have been others."

"Act of destruction more like."

"Hermione?" She heard Harry call from the front of the shop.

"In the back." She called to him.

"What a mess." He said. He exchanged greetings with Dean, who excused himself back to Flourish and Blotts.

"I don't understand who would do this, Harry."

"People are unhappy." Harry said.

"With Pastries? Or books? What exactly have I done that is so offensive?" Hermione said sharply.

"I guess they see it as a symbol for something larger."

"Well, there are real people involved. Lavender is heartbroken. Some of us are attempting to create some normalcy in this society. And for them to come along and just tear it apart... it sucks! Do you really have no idea who's done this?"

"I have some ideas but no proof."

"This has to stop."

Harry seemed to be avoiding her eyes. She guessed that he might be ashamed that he was so powerless in dealing with simple damage. Damage in a pretty large scale as far as she was concerned.

Harry left shortly after that and Hermione got stuck into cleaning the tarred ex-shop.

"Nott will take care of it." Draco said when she finally came home. She looked an absolute mess and all she wanted was a cuddle from Cygnus. "I promise."

Hermione just nodded and walked upstairs for a bath. She stunk of smoke, it was in her hair, in her clothes, probably absorbed into her skin.

Lavender didn't seem to come around over the next few days. She had lost interest in the shop and Hermione appealed to her to start again. Society needed her, needed her to do normal things. They got lots of condolence letters from their customers who all vowed to support the rebuilding effort.

Hermione persevered. Lavender would come around when the shop looked a little better. Hermione certainly hoped so because she couldn't bake to save her life. She still hadn't figured out how to stop this from happening again. This was more than a brick in the window.

The clean up slowly progressed and Hermione was pleased with the results. She had to hire some people to help. She'd also found someone willing to do a bit of construction to put the place back in working order.

It had taken longer than she'd expected, but it was starting to look less like a dark bombsite and more like a construction site.

She hadn't heard anything about how things had gone with finding out who'd done this so she decided, before they got too far to get an update. She certainly didn't want to rebuild for this person to do it again.

She sent a note to Harry to see if they could meet up. She got one back saying he was home and she could pop over any time she wanted.

She found Harry in the kitchen wearing jeans and a sweater. He obviously hadn't been at the Ministry that day. Probably helping Ginny who was finally getting over her constant morning sickness.

"Hey Harry." She said and she plopped her bag down on the counter. "Any news on our arsonist?"

"Sorry Hermione, I don't know." Harry said as Ginny walked in the room.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Hermione asked with confusion. Harry and Ron were pretty much law enforcement for the community, so how could he not know. "Its was taken out of my hands."

"What do you mean?" She was sounding like a broken record.

Harry shrugged. "There is a new department at the Ministry, the Department of Reconstruction and Order."

"And this new department have taken on the investigation?"

"Yep." Harry said and put a tea towel down on the bench.

"I don't understand." Hermione said.

"This new department," Ginny said, "is tasked with dealing with anything or anyone who threatens the order."

"So what is your job now?" Hermione asked.

"None, he quit." Ginny said.

"Quit?"

"Ron too."

"Wha...?" Hermione started. "Why?"

"Sit down, Hermione." Harry said. "I'll bring you some tea."

She did as he asked and Harry poured some tea. Ginny obviously took this as a cue to make herself absent, which was ominous.

"Nott has decided to bring in the werewolves to support the workings of this department."

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"They are hassling anyone who they don't know, or who isn't in their pocket, if you will." He continued. "Were you not aware of this?"

"Of course not." Hermione said offended.

"They are 'questioning' people." He said, stressing the questioning part like it was a euphemism. "And anyone they don't like, they give a hard time."

"I'm sure..." Hermione started trying to say something reassuring, but the fact that werewolves have been brought in was pretty damning. Finally she just sat back in her chair and absorbed it.

"Do people know this?" She finally asked.

"Yes, I'm surprised you didn't."

"I've been busy cleaning up." She defended herself. "And any spare time I have, I spend with Cygnus."

Harry played with his spoon.

"And the people attacking me are the people who aren't too happy about this?" She asked. "But this department would have been set up after my shops started being attacked."

"Yes," Harry said, "but the under current and sentiment was there before."

"What sentiment?"

"Don't you see it?" Harry said almost pressingly. "I can't believe you're so blind."

Hermione was offended again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You control everything." He said. "Or rather Malfoy. He controls the food, the information, the money, all goods, even the Ministry. He

controls everything in this society. His people are in Gringotts, the Daily Prophet, the whole food production system with the exception of Hogwarts. You control most of the non food retail. What he says, goes."

Hermione's jaw dropped again, her mind spinning. "It isn't like that. We are just trying to build this society up again."

"To Malfoy Inc."

"No Harry. We are just using his resources to create employment and infrastructure so we can recover. Bring some normalcy back to people's lives."

"Well that might be your objective, Hermione, but its not his."

"That's not true. You have it wrong. It isn't like that."

"How would you know, Hermione, you are so completely insulated from it. So caught up in it, you can't see what's in front of you nose."

"I'm telling you, it isn't like that. Draco isn't like that."

"What, acting on the family objective of being the rulers and the top of the elite of this society." He said. "That has been their objective since before records began. He just in a position of making good on it."

Hermione didn't want to believe it. She wanted to convince Harry that he was wrong, but there was that niggle in the back of her mind that told her it might make sense.

"That can't be true." She said quietly. "It can't be."

"And you're a part of it." Harry continued. "That's why people have been attacking your shops. Because they are the retail front of Malfoy Inc."

Chapter 45

Chapter 45

Hermione waited for Draco to come home. She felt uneasy. Cygnus was at her feet playing with some chess pieces that were running all over the board trying to avoid the toddler's roaming hands.

His blond hair was curling softly. It was getting a little long, but she didn't have the heart to cut it. Just having him there calmed her immensely. She almost forgot about her conversation with Harry, who implied that Draco was controlling the wizarding world.

It couldn't be like that. It must be a misunderstanding, or at least a misperception. Anyone who knew her, knew she wasn't like that. Surely people would trust her motives at the very least.

She heard Draco arrive through the floo a while later. He came to see Cygnus right away as he usually did. It pleased her that he wanted to see him as soon as he came home. And as far as Cygnus was concerned, it was Christmas.

She sat back and just enjoyed the view of her two blond boys playing. She put the worrying thoughts out of her mind, along with the niggle that her perfect family was maybe not so entirely perfect. Looking at it right now, it was.

"I met Harry today." Hermione said after a while.

"Oh." Draco said.

"He's quit the Ministry." She continued. "Did you know?"

"I heard."

"Because Nott had brought in the werewolves to deal with challenges. Did you know?"

"Are you interrogating me?"

"There were just all these things going on that I had no idea about." She said. "And Harry seems to think that the sabotage to my stores is related."

"To the werewolves?" Draco said as he lay on the floor next to Cygnus.

"Actually Harry seemed to feel that people linked it back to you." She said and held her breath. She wasn't sure what he would say or how he'd react. She realised that there were some things she didn't know about him. He was secretive on some levels. He had been with his intentions towards her. He had also been less than forthcoming about what he was doing when he left here each day.

A shadow crossed in the back of his eyes. Then he shrugged and returned to play with Cygnus.

Hermione watched him for a while.

"Doesn't that bother you?" She prodded.

"Not really. There are always people who are jealous. If you have things, people are jealous. That is just the nature of it."

"Burning a shop down seems a tad more than jealousy. It seems people are angry."

"So?" Draco said. "I can't go about my life worrying if everyone is happy about what I do. There is always going to be someone who does like it if you try to achieve something."

"Maybe they are worried about what you are trying to achieve."

He was getting annoyed now, she could see the tension building in his shoulders. "I've done more to rebuild this society than anyone else. We have some semblance of a working society, and I don't give a damned if someone gets their knickers in a twist about it. I am

certainly not going to fall to pieces because someone can't get their act together and do something for themselves."

"But using werewolves is just so... I can't even think of the word."

"That's Nott's business. They're a resources and he is making the best of it."

"For what purpose?"

"For order." Draco said sharply. "There has to be order. Even you must recognise that."

"Of course, but using methods like werewolves is just too much."

"Things were slipping." He said. "You felt the brunt of it. We can't have that."

Hermione twisted her fingers in her skirt.

"How much of it do you control?" She asked after a while.

"I have no idea what you mean."

"How much of this new economy do you control?"

He shrugged. "I am just like everyone else, trying to make sure me and mine are a part of this new world. Just like everyone else, or as they should be. It's not my problem if some can't get it together. Anyone with any brains is positioning themselves. That is the way of the world. The way its always been."

He got up and walked out. That was the end of the conversation.

Hermione ran through the conversation in her mind. Most of what he said was logical. Except for the werewolf thing, but he said that was Nott. Although a part of her mind was saying that was bullshit and he was lying. He had admitted that he controlled Nott. To then say he

had no control over Nott's methods was just not true. He just didn't care enough to do anything about it.

Draco would not be drawn on the conversation again. Hermione didn't know what to do. She had no communication from Ron or Harry. She didn't know what they were doing. Part of her was still hurt that they didn't quite trust her enough with their concerns before this and that they could even think that she would condone something like Nott bringing in the werewolves.

She had a lunch scheduled with Neville that day. Maybe Neville would have an idea of what was going on. Lavender still hadn't come back to the shop so there wasn't much Hermione could do to return it to its working order if Lavender wasn't playing ball. It was a shame because people stopped her all the time and asked when it was going to open again.

There were people in Diagon Alley as she walked to the pub to meet Neville. He was already waiting for her. He kissed her on the cheek as she got there and they settled down at one of the tables.

"Did the delivery arrive alright?" She asked.

"Yes. The books arrived exactly when they were supposed to. Thank you. It's wonderful to have proper books again. They don't have to fight over them."

"Fighting over books. Completely understandable in my view, but not something I actually thought would occur." Hermione said with a laugh.

"Lupin sends his regards."

"How is he?"

"Better." Neville said. "He's managed to improve the wolfbane potion he makes, so he's a little less grumpy these days. Although perhaps a little more concerned."

"About the werewolves at the Ministry?" She asked.

"He's really not happy about it."

"Neither am I." Hermione said.

"It's just a little touch of brutality we could do without."

She fiddled with her napkin. She didn't know what to say.

"So Harry has been offered the Defence of the Dark Arts professorship." Neville said. It was news to her, not something she had expected. Not that she was displeased.

"I didn't know." She said and wondered why Harry hadn't told her.

Neville cleared his throat. "He hasn't accepted yet. Probably why he isn't talking about it much."

It wasn't the only thing Harry wasn't talking about, it seemed. He hadn't mentioned people concerns about Draco until someone firebombed her shop.

"It would be a perfect for him." She said trying not to show anything other than being pleased as punch, but she wasn't sure she was succeeding. She was pleased about the role, just not the chasm that seemed to have developed between them.

Neville talked about a study he was doing on Highland herbs and Hermione tried to keep track of the conversation, but her thoughts kept on side tracking. She was not going to allow this chasm. She was going to confront Harry again and again until it was gone. She'd plague him if she had to. He would learn to accept her marriage and the fact that she wasn't some evil trying to take over the world. And neither was Draco.

And then she was going to find some way of getting rid of the werewolves. Whatever Nott was thinking, she would make him realise that they were doing more harm than good. Sure they needed

order, but they also needed co-operation and cohesion. Werewolves just didn't promote that.

Neville was getting really excited about the properties of this one particular herb. It made her smile, partially because she felt her resolution lift something uncomfortable off her mind.

She had originally agreed to marry Draco because it would help cohesion in society, and partially because he threatened to withhold his assistance when they were being attacked. Although he admitted he'd only made it seem that way to get her to agree. She was still the brightest witch of her age, probably of all living witches at the moment, she would fix this. She wasn't exactly sure how, but she would do it.

It was always good to have lunch with Neville, he always seemed to bring out the best in her. His presence just seemed to let her put things in perspective, maybe because he was so unflinchingly positive and good. And they needed more of that.

She was going to fix this and she wasn't going to spend her time worrying about some stupid patisserie. Lavender didn't want to be involved, so stuff it. There were more important things to to turn her mind to.

Chapter 46

Chapter 46

Hermione wasn't quite sure how to go about her new mission. She decided that perhaps dealing with Nott first might be a good idea. He didn't come across as completely unreasonable. Obviously Draco didn't care about the werewolves, which disappointed her. But if he wouldn't address it, she would.

Then she would deal with Harry. It would be particularly good if she could throw her achievement of removing the werewolves down on the table.

She decided that she might have a quiet word with Nott at Cornfoot's party. A ravenclaw home, making for good neutral territory. The Patil girls sent a note over saying they had another dress for her. She was starting to get a collection of party dresses. The whole unnecessary of it was starting to grate on her. She didn't need another dress, but apparently it was not acceptable to be seen in the same dress twice.

She walked from Flourish and Blotts over to the Patel girl's store, but got sidelined by a scuffle on the street. A Hufflepuff she didn't know well was yelling something about being robbed. Someone confronted him and before she knew what was happening, wands were drawn. The tension was thick as more people were drawn by the scuffle.

The boy seemed a little unstable and he kept on shifting his wand back and foreword calling them all bastards. Hermione decided that it was time to step in, but chose the wrong time as hexes started flying. She got hit by a stinging hex and it dropped her to the ground.

Commotion and screaming broke out as hexes were flying everywhere. She found a large plant box to withdraw to while she thought of what to do. Before long there was a change in voices. Deeper voices. Men's voices. The yelling continued for a while until

things seemed to finally calm as the werewolves had come in and taken control of the situation.

She hated to admit it, but they broke up the scuffle and subdued the errand boy. They chased anyone else away including her. One of them literally pushed her down the street, letting her know in no uncertain terms that she wasn't welcome there anymore. There was no doubt that they were intimidating.

They were gone with the boy as quickly as they came. She felt the after effects of the adrenalin coursing through her veins. Still, she wanted to know what they were going with the boy, but they were gone. The alley was quiet and empty like nothing had happened. If it wasn't for the scorch marks on the wall, it might as well not have happened.

If Harry was still at the Ministry, she would run there right now, but he wasn't. She didn't really know who to ask now. Maybe she could ask Draco to find out what happened to the boy. She wondered if it was the same person who had caused so many problems.

Hermione was feeling uncomfortable in a slinky little silver dress as they apparated to the party. Draco looked fabulous as he always did in formal clothes. He had promised her that he would check on the boy that the werewolves had carted off. The whole incident left a queasy feeling in her stomach. Looking at Draco didn't help, but for entirely different reasons.

She just wanted the evening to be over. She wanted to spend the night at home, in bed to be precise, but duty called.

It was a typical party. Some of the girls were again really sorry about the patisserie, and wondering when they were opening again. Apparently there was some coconut thing Lavender baked that was to die for. A little while ago, hearing that would have pleased her, but now she just wanted to slap them and demand they acknowledge that perhaps there were more important things.

Draco was chatting to Isobel, who wore an even slinkier dress. Hermione felt a stab of jealousy. She didn't like the girl and certainly not her familiarity with Draco. She watched as the girl placed her polished hand on Draco's arm. Hermione was pretty certain the girl was flirting with him. Luckily, it didn't look like Draco was flirting with her.

Hermione didn't want to think about it. She had a mission and she was going to start the conversation with Nott. She wondered if a petition would sway him. Although he was a person who used werewolves to get his will enforced.

There was a part of her that was irrationally grateful that they had come and resolved the chaos, but on another level they were offensive and there was no way around that.

Astoria Greengrass was next to him looking utterly gorgeous. The girl did look carefree and effortlessly beautiful, which hinted that there really was a great deal of effort involved.

"Can I speak to you for a minute?" She asked him with a smile.

"Sure." He said. "How is your son?" He asked when they stepped away.

"Getting bigger. Growing up so fast."

"Tell me about it." Nott said. "Artimus is getting bigger every time I see him."

Hermione didn't want to talk about the boy he had with Lisa. She was glad they were civilised enough that he did some part of the parenting, but really she didn't want to know.

"I wanted to talk to you about the werewolves." Hermione said. "I am just a little concerned that having them around sets a dark tone."

"It is dark times."

"But wouldn't it be better to make it seemed like things weren't so bleak?"

Nott shifted. He seemed to be uncomfortable.

"I am sure we can get on ok without them." She continued.

"Look Hermione, things are getting more difficult. Things might look alright but it is taking a huge effort to keep things from fall apart at the seams. The werewolves are effective."

"But..."

"Where are we going to get to if we can't keep order?" He said cutting her off. "Things could get really bad. Really bad."

"Surely we are not doing that badly." Hermione challenged. "There are some unhappy people with grievances. Perhaps if people felt some assurance that things were going to get better, things would settle down, but werewolves aren't really promoting the idea that things are getting better. It's a brutal measure bringing them in."

He pulled her behind a pillar by her arm.

"Keeping the veneer that things are getting better is important, but it's a veneer."

"I don't know what you mean." She said searching his face.

"I am trying my best, but things are getting ...polarised."

"Polarised?" She repeated. Why were there always things going on that she didn't know about. "So we make an effort to bring parties together. Talk it through and sort it out."

"This isn't about sorting it out, its about power."

The word sent a shiver up her spine. She knew who cared about power. She just didn't know what they lay of the land really looked

like. Harry seemed to think it was all about Draco. There had obviously been some kind of play when Nott had taken Draco, but Nott had lost that fight. Primarily because of her.

Nott was watching her as she head was analysing the conversation.

"My hands are tied about the werewolves." He said.

That was not what she wanted to hear. This was not going the way she hoped.

"We're in trouble." He said bluntly and quietly. "And when it comes down to it, you can't trust me. Remember that. I have made promises. Compelling promises. I can't help you. I will do what I can, but don't ever turn to me for help because my hands are tied."

With that, he was gone. She felt the rush of air on her face as he departed quickly. She felt a bit stunned. What the fuck was that about? He sounded so serious. There was no doubt that his words were full of warnings, but she wasn't entirely sure of what.

This was about power, he had said. Slytherins cared about power. She walked back towards the party and passed some of the prominent Slytherins on the way. Zabini, who ran Gringotts. Millicent Bulstrode, who ran the Daily Prophet. Nott, who gave her a dark look, controlled the Ministry, and then Draco who controlled him. Maybe Harry was right, maybe he controlled all of them.

The Slytherins had attacked Draco. They had taken him and imprisoned him. Could Nott have done it if he didn't have the co-operation of the others? And she had gone in and rescued him.

"There you are." She heard Draco beside her, making her jump. "Where did you get to?"

"Just tried to implore Nott to stop using the werewolves." She said through her suddenly dry throat. It was the truth.

"Any success?"

"No." She said. She watched the familiar grin spread across his face.

"It would be hard for him to give up his new toys." Draco said and looked around the room. "He does like order. And to some extent he does have a point, order must be enforced."

Chapter 47

Chapter 47

Hermione sat in their bedroom and brushed her hair after returning home. It was late and she was tired. She didn't know if she was really tired or if it was just Nott's words and perspective dragging her down.

Draco was already in bed reading in the black silk pyjama pants that were never not flattering. They make the curves and lines of his legs stand out through the subdued shimmer of the fabric, and the stark contrast of his skin never ceased to garner her admiration.

"Draco." She said.

He acknowledge her with a noise.

"You need to lighten up." She said. "Whatever it is you're going and I don't know what you are doing, you need to back off for a while."

"There is no reason for you to get your knickers in a twist." He said and continued reading. "Actually, I have a must better idea of what to do with you knickers."

She couldn't help smiling, but it was soon replaced with a frown.

"I'm just worried." She said. "I think you're being too aggressive and its causing problems."

"Too aggressive for whom?" He asked. "People always try to tear you down when you have things. It's a fact of life, you can't live your life by it. You keep your eye on what's best for you family, and its that simple."

"What if what's best for your family is not best overall?"

"Since when is having good systems, a growing economy and order not best for society?"

"If it disenfranchises."

"Fuck them. I am not running around after some snivelling loser just because they can't get their act together." He said. "And I am certainly not going to sacrifice the fortunes of my family for them. There are winners and there are losers, you pick which side you want to be on. Now, come to bed."

This is what she'd wanted all evening. To snuggle in and forget everything else. She slipped under the blankets and slid her arm around him.

"Don't worry." He said. "I'll make sure nothing happens to you or Cygnus. I will never be under anyone's thumb and I will do whatever I have to make sure of it. Voldemort took all of our choices away, humiliated and threatened us. That is never going to happen to my family again."

"He's gone now." Hermione said.

They kissed. It still made her world shift on its axis whenever he kissed her. Her worries slipped away as they touched. Or maybe they made things a little bit sweeter. The anchor in the uncertainties, that he still wanted her, and she needed him. Loved him, flaws and all.

She'd never known he'd be so devastated by Voldemort and his activities. She realised the pressure on him must have been immense. Maybe no one was happier that Voldemort was gone than him.

She opened herself up completely to him, she would let him have anything he needed from her. She wanted her body to heal him as he explored her skin, kissed her deeply. As much as he'd fought

against it, deep down he'd known all along that he needed her, even if hadn't always accept it.

She wasn't sure she could live without this now. She had never wanted him until she had in some absurd twist of fate fallen in love with him, but she absolutely needed him now. She needed him inside her.

Hermione hadn't given up on the idea that she could fix this, mediate somehow. They had all managed to co-exist alright in school for years, surely they could do it again. The biggest problem had been her, Harry and Draco. She and Draco were ok, more than ok judging from last night. She just needed Harry to come to the party. She floo'd over to Grimmauld Place the next day. She hadn't succeeded in taming the werewolf issue yet. She'd ended up getting distracted. Draco naked tended to do that.

Ron was there too. She hadn't seen him for a while, but he was pensive.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"Yeah, I'm not sure telling you is the right thing." He said.

"What? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you're with him aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I'm still me."

"Ron." Harry warned.

"What's going on, Harry?" She asked.

"Nothing's going on." He said. "People are just unhappy with things."

"I know that." She said. "My shop windows have told me so. But instead of complaining about it, its time to do something about it."

"Exactly." Ron said.

"Look, I am going to get them to get rid of the werewolves." She said. "I am working on it."

"This isn't about the werewolves." Harry said. "It is, but it isn't."

"Its about Malfoy." Ginny said.

"And the Slytherins." Ron added.

Hermione didn't say anything for a minute. "So we start a dialogue to address some of the issues."

"This is beyond dialogue." Ron insisted. "They are stealing people of the streets."

"I know. They are overzealous, trying to keep order, but ..."

"Control, Hermione." Harry added. "They are exerting control."

"We can..."

"You talk away, Hermione." Ron said. "Have a little pillow talk. They think they control us, but sorry, we didn't agree to that. Its not what we signed up for. They don't get to decide who gets what, and they don't get to decide who can be free and who they feel like imprisoning."

"They are just trying to keep order so we can rebuild. And they aren't getting it right all the time. None of us are professionals at this. We are all trying our best."

"They are building a society that suits them." Harry said. "And that doesn't necessarily suit everyone. There are a lot of people who don't feel like accepting that."

"So what are you suggesting?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know." Harry said with a shrug.

"How are we supposed to deal with it if you don't know what you want to do?" She challenged.

"They're making it a bit hard as they are abducting anyone who does challenge them." Ginny said.

"So first of all," Harry said receiving a warning look from Ron, "we're going to break them out."

Hermione was stumped for a moment.

"We don't accept their 'right' to take people." Harry said quietly. "And since they won't listen, we are going to take matters into our own hands. Merlin knows that they are doing to those people."

"I'm sure they aren't doing anything."

"Really, can you guarantee that?" Ron said.

She knew that she couldn't. She didn't know what they were doing to people, especially since they had the werewolves doing it.

"We have to create a way to have open dialogue." Hermione said.

"They're not interested in open dialogue." Harry said. "If you don't do what they like..."

"What he likes." Ron interrupted.

"He withholds food." Harry continued. "He controls pretty much all the food supply, and if he doesn't like you, he makes it hard for you to eat. Hogwarts is having to feed more than their students these days."

This was news to Hermione. She hadn't known he was doing that.

"I will deal with it." She said. "I know he is a bit controlling. He had a really bad time being jerked around by Voldemort, he is just reacting to that, making sure he's never in that position again."

"What, by becoming him?" Ginny said.

"That's a bit extreme." Hermione said with a snort.

"Well, I'm sorry your boyfriend has issues, but we don't really care." Ron said.

"He's my husband, Ron." She said sharply. "All I am saying is that there are reasons for why he is a bit overbearing."

"Then you deal with it." Harry said. "Or before long, it will be dealt with."

Hermione nodded as she was trying to think through the situation. "We need to be smart about this. We all want a well functioning society, so we all have the same goal. We need to keep that in mind, and not fly off the handle. We can work this out."

Hermione felt an immense level of pressure when she left Harry's. She was annoyed with Ron for even suggesting that she couldn't be trusted. But she hadn't realised that things were that bad, that they were using the food supply to control people.

She wondered at Nott's words. Everyone suggested that Draco was behind it all, the puppet master. She would have to deal with him, it was just that he shut her down everytime she tried to talk to him. He revealed so little of himself. She'd only just learnt about the deep scars from dealing with the Death Eaters, and that had only been the briefest mention.

He wasn't exactly big on compromising. So far, he had done precious little of it. Actually, he hadn't compromised at all. Well, maybe the part where he let her near him. That was a compromise of a kind. Or maybe just an acceptance.

She was worried about him pushing her away. He was intensely uncomfortable about his feelings for her, and she knew it.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48

Harry and the others attacked the Ministry a few days later. She'd hoped they'd think better of it, but they'd gone through with it. And there had been enough of them to overpower the werewolves. She guessed anyway, there wasn't a great deal of information about it. The Daily Prophet reported a sanitised version of it. It didn't even mention that the aim of the raid was to free the people held at the Ministry.

She had no idea how many were in there to begin with, let alone how many they got out. She wasn't sure what she wanted. Whether she wanted them to rescue people to add credence to their action, or if she wanted them not to find anything so that their actions had been completely unnecessary to begin with. But she'd seen them take someone herself. They'd carted that boy away in front of her.

She just wished they'd hadn't been so blunt, so confrontational in the way they went about it.

"Did you know?" Draco said from the door of her sitting room. "Did you know they were going to break into the Ministry?"

Hermione sighed and nodded.

Draco stood there for a second then walked into the room.

"You didn't tell me."

"I didn't think they were serious." She said.

"And if you had, would you have told me?"

She didn't answer. She knew the answer was no.

He grabbed all the things on side table in a large swipe and whipped it across the floor breaking a vase and scattering books and papers everywhere. The violence of it made her jump.

He was breathing heavy while he stared at the mess he'd made.

"I told you to never give me reason not to trust you." He said. He walked towards her and placed her hands on the back of her neck.

"You have to make sure you know where your loyalties lie." He said. "And act accordingly."

"They are my friends." She said.

"If they were your friends, they wouldn't put you in this position." He said. "You've disappointed me and I am sorry for that."

"Draco.." she started until he hushed her.

"Your duty is to act in the interest of this family, a family you're now part of. If you won't do it for me, then do it for your son."

After that he walked out of the room. Hermione sat down. She had so many conflicting emotions she couldn't define them, but in essence they all felt bad.

Betraying her friends was not an option, no matter what, and that left her in a bad position. There was no way around that, irrespective of who was right or wrong.

She didn't know what to do. She didn't even know if her plans for a peaceful resolution were possible now. But what choice did she have?

There was another skirmish in Diagon Alley the next day. Dean told her when she got to Flourish and Blotts.

"Things are getting hostile." Dean said. "Gryffindors are not the flavour of the day."

"Were you part of the attack on the Ministry?" Hermione asked.

Dean watched her for a few seconds and then nodded.

"I won't tell." She said.

"Good." He said. "But I'm not sure how long I can stick around here. I don't think things are going to get better."

"We have to try to make things better."

"I'm not sure anyone is interested, Hermione." He said. "They just want to be right."

"That doesn't help. We have a semblance of a society, we need to build off that."

"I think they believe that you have to tear it down before you can rebuild. Otherwise it will just be another version of this."

"That's not the answer." She said with exasperation.

"Well, neither party is backing down." Dean said. "The Slytherins are fighting back."

Hermione went home and sent a note to Harry, pleading with him to stop and reconsider how he was going about things.

She got a note back saying they'd tried it her way and it had gotten them nowhere.

She wished Harry was here right now so she could beat some sense into him. She considered going over there, but wondered if she was better off dealing with Draco. If she could get a concession, it might help things along.

She decided to seek Harry out the next day, but when she went to floo to his house, the floo was blocked, and not from his side. Draco

had blocked the fireplaces. She tried a couple to make sure. She tried to apparate too, but couldn't. He had locked her in.

She was furious and she sent an owl to him with some very choice words. She didn't receive one back and she spent the whole day fuming. She actually managed to exhaust herself by the time he came home that evening.

"You locked me in." She stated.

"Its for your own good."

"Am I a prisoner now?" She said tartly.

"You're too soft and gullible. They'll take advantage of you." He said.

"That's ridiculous." She said disbelieving. "You have to stop this, this is insanity."

"They attacked us." He said with anger. "If anyone has lost the plot its your friends. They are trying to destroy everything. I know you think they're your friends, but they wouldn't be able to resist themselves from using you and using our son. I can't let that happen. I am just trying to keep you safe."

Part of her just wanted to give in and let him wrap her in cotton wool, but it wasn't really her nature. He stepped closer to her.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but we need to take care of this." He continued. "And I realise you feel a bit torn, but you are just going to get hurt if you get in the middle of this. You didn't chose this, they did, so let them deal with it. This is not your fight."

"But if you keep going like this, there is going to be a war."

"Its already here." He said and stepped back.

"Draco.." she said as he walked away. She was nowhere near ready to give up.

"I will protect you even if you fight me." He said before he stepped through the door.

Draco wouldn't budge and he wouldn't discuss it further. She hated that he felt he had the right to take such a stance. She knew it was in his culture to make unilateral decisions. It wasn't in hers though and she hated it utterly.

At least he hadn't taken the owls away. She considered asking Harry for help, but wasn't sure how that would go. It could be completely disastrous. On the other hand, what was Harry supposed to do, Malfoy Manor had the best wards in the country. Set by Voldemort himself. Harry couldn't get in if he tried. She really was stuck.

Draco's idea of her just sitting this fight out was preying on her. She didn't sit out things. Especially things that involved her friends. Problem was her friends were on one side and her family on the other. Both accusing the other of being the aggressor.

There was just that little niggle in her head that said, sometimes screamed, that Draco was the true aggressor. Her Gryffindors wouldn't go this far unless they felt there was a reason. Even Nott warned her against Draco. She just didn't want to believe it. And now he had her prisoner.

She got a quickly scribbled note from Dean saying that the Burrows had been attacked and he needed to flee. He was sorry, but obviously he couldn't help her with Flourish and Blotts anymore. They'd be at HQ if she needed help.

Hermione was shocked. Draco had attacked the Burrows, attacked Ron and Pansy's home. Grimmauld Place was still secret and none of them were able to reveal the location of it, which meant that Draco didn't know where it was. They would be safe there.

It was becoming clear that things were going south fast.

Draco cut off her owl access the next day. She now had no idea what was going on. She was being kept in the dark. Which meant that there was stuff going on that he didn't want her to know about.

Slytherins were starting to appear at their house. There were meetings behind closed doors.

There was a pervasive feeling of tension and awkwardness in the house. Draco was withdrawing from her completely. She really was a prisoner now and she felt it.

He appeared in her room one night.

"Do you know where they are?" He said coldly. There wasn't warmth in his eyes. She started to recognise that this was his military mode, where he shut down inside and worked completely on logic.

"Who?" She said, knowing exactly who he was talking about.

"Your little problematic friends." He said. "They have gone somewhere, do you know where?"

"No." She said, trying to sound convincing, because she knew where they were. She could never reveal it, even if she wanted to, but she thought it would be easier to just say she didn't know. She didn't think he would go as far as to try to force it out of her, but she didn't ever want the knowledge that he would try.

He didn't look convinced, but he accepted her answer and left. She felt a great sense of relief as he left. She hated that she did, but it was true. It had happened too fast, the shift in their relationship.

"He will use you against them eventually." Nott said quietly, startling her in the library. Everything seemed to startle her lately. He felt his finger up to his lips to ask her not to say anything. "Eventually, he will."

Hermione didn't want to believe him, but she also knew that he was telling her the truth.

"He will win this at any cost." Nott continued as he scanned to see no one was watching. "You need to leave."

"He's locked me in."

"There is an old quidditch practice field outside the wards, with a corridor into one of downstairs halls. We used to play there, but he hasn't used it in years, I'm sure he hasn't given it any consideration for quite a while. Voldemort never knew about it. The wards there would be weak, you should be able to break them. I have to go."

"Thank you." She said and grabbed his hand. He pulled out of her grip.

"Don't forget what I said about trusting me. You can't. I have to do what he says." Nott said and was gone.

Hermione waited until Draco left the next day. She gathered up Cygnus and some of his most crucial things. It took two hours to find the magical corridor. A taint tickle on her skin alerted her that she'd finally found it. Her stomach was filled with nervous tension. She expected Draco to appear at any minute and there was a small part of her that wished he would.

If he stopped her it wouldn't be her fault she couldn't leave. But the house was quiet. She had a good four hours since he would probably notice she was missing.

She was transported to the disused quidditch field through this strange suction feeling. This was a step that had crossed a line if he ever found out. She could still go back and he would never know, but if he found her here, she would likely be in trouble.

The space was so overgrown, she could barely see the quidditch posts. She could imagine a younger Draco flying around with his

friends. Just another little tidbit of his life. He always was a confident flyer. Cygnus was unhappy with the feeling from the transportation and Hermione had to spend some time trying to settle him before making her way to the edge and the wards surrounding the field.

The wards were weak as they hadn't been reinforced in some time, but they were still good wards and it took time to break through. Cygnus was starting to fret and in the end she had to put him to sleep. She hated doing it, but she couldn't go back now.

It took hours to get through the wards, she was starting to get seriously worried that her absence was discovered. She felt the tension tightening every minute that passed to the point where her wand was shaking slightly as time went by. She felt sick with tension and worry, but she had to persevere. She didn't want to think about what she would have to face if she went back. Even if he didn't do anything to her, she would not be able to live with the knowledge that she had stood by and done nothing. She had no choice in this.

At last there was a crack large enough for her to crawl through. She apparated with the sleeping Cygnus to Grimmauld Place the second she was free.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49

Hermione arrived at Grimmauld Place late in the afternoon. She'd made a few stops along the way in case there was some kind of tracking through the Malfoy wards. She didn't know and Draco probably wouldn't tell her if there was. She knew he would never trust her completely. The fact that he'd locked her in proved that, but then maybe he was right not to trust her. Her acts have now shown that she's without a doubt on the other side. Maybe he knew that would always be the case.

She wondered if the point of no return had passed, the point where he would be aware of what she'd done. There was a part of her wanted to return and put everything back the way it was. It was hard to give up on him, on love, but rationally she knew she had no choice. And through her actions, she had torn their little family apart.

The point passed without note or fanfare. She wasn't sure when, but there came a time when the probability of him not knowing was low and he was likely very angry with her right now.

"I'm sorry." Harry said as he led her upstairs. She didn't respond, she didn't feel like talking about it. She just wanted to be alone. He took her into one of the spare bedrooms.

"We've resurrected the Order of the Phoenix." He said. "We're having a meeting tonight. You should be there."

"I don't know Harry, I'm a bit weary tonight." She said.

"Of course." He said. "But if you feel up to it, you should come down."

Harry left her and she placed Cygnus down on the bed. He was still sleeping from the charm she'd put on him. She needed to wake him

soon, but she didn't want to. She hated that she had to wake him up to a new reality, one where his world had changed forever. No, she needed to wake him up and to not cry because that would distress him. She had to pretend that everything was fine.

Instead she played with him. He was curious about his new surroundings, completely unaware of what a change it really was. He certainly didn't realise that they would not be going home again, probably ever.

She could hear people downstairs, but she wasn't up to seeing people. After a while she heard a knock on the door. She expected it to be Harry asking her to come down again, but it was Parvati.

"Malfoy's lost it. He burnt the store. All our stock is gone." She said. "There is nothing left. He gave us two seconds to get out."

"I'm sorry." Hermione said flatly because she just couldn't react to the news at the moment.

"He burnt Flourish and Blotts too." Parvati continued. Hermione wasn't sure whether her tone was accusatory or not. It was her fault after all.

"He burnt everything associated with you."

"I'm sorry you lost your business." Hermione said.

"It was just a matter of time, I guess. It looks like things are headed south pretty rapidly. Maybe you being with him just slowed the inevitable."

Hermione wondered if there was a room full of people downstairs who blamed her, although for what, she wasn't entirely sure. Maybe for forcing a bit of grey in a black and white world. Maybe they were gloating. She didn't care.

No, that wasn't like her friends. It wasn't the Gryffindor way. Although some of them had turned on Harry when the DeathEaters were writing all that rubbish about him. Sometimes in practicality, the Gryffindor way was messier than the theory. Their black and white world tended to lend itself to quick judgements.

Hermione didn't leave her room until breakfast the next day. Harry and Ginny was sitting in the kitchen.

"Hi Hermione, sleep well?" Harry asked.

She nodded, although it was a complete lie. She hadn't slept at all.

"There was some trouble last night." He continued.

"I heard, Parvati told me."

"Not entirely unexpected though." Harry said. "You're safe here. Malfoy doesn't know where we are. Sirius moved the whole house, so Malfoy won't be able to find it."

"Do you think he'd hurt you?" Ginny asked.

"I don't know." Hermione said honestly. "He would never hurt Cygnus."

"It might be best to assume that he wouldn't necessarily hold back when it come to you. Just to be on the safe side." Ginny said.

"He is going to be looking for you." Harry said. "He's not really one to let these things go, is he?"

"I don't know Harry, I've never been in this position before."
Hermione said losing her temper.

Harry grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "We'll deal with it. We always do. But we should probably keep you out of sight as much as possible in the near term."

"I can't hide away forever." Hermione said.

"Let's just get a feel for how this is all going to play out before we make any decisions."

Hermione felt like bristling, but she knew his intentions were right.

It was quiet for a while, Hermione spent most of her time with Cygnus who was getting fretful and cranky due to the big change in his surroundings. He liked both Harry and Ginny, but he clearly had an expectation that they should be going home soon.

Their evening was interrupted by a Patronus from Ron. The Burrow was being attacked. Harry responded immediately. He threw on his coat and apparated.

"He won't let me fight." Ginny said. "Just because I'm pregnant doesn't mean I'm disabled."

"He's just worried." Hermione said still trying to absorb the implications that Draco was attacking the Burrow. "I should go."

"No, you stay here." Ginny said firmly. "You being there would just be fuel on the fire."

"Really, I'm not sure it would make it worse."

"Except it would give him a target to aim for. No, you have to stay here."

"I feel useless just sitting here."

"Tell me about it."

Hermione had made her mind up that she was going to go and help when the door burst open and people started filing in.

"They attacked the Burrow." Seamus said.

"Is everyone alright?" Ginny said.

"Yeah, but it was a close call. They came in force. They planned it." Harry said as he walked in.

"Is Ron ok?" Hermione asked. "And Pansy?"

"Ron's got a burn, but he's ok. He sent Pansy away the moment there was trouble, we're not quite sure where she is yet."

"I'll see to his burns." Ginny said. "Where's Neville?"

"He's still at Hogwarts. I'll send a note for him to come." Harry said.

The house was full of people, all hanging around talking.

"It's the first time they've attacked someone's house." Harry said quietly to Hermione. "It's making everyone nervous. It means everyone is vulnerable."

"So what are we going to do?" Hermione said.

"We hit them back." Harry said. "Hard."

"Their houses are well protected." Hermione said not sure how she felt about the whole retaliation business.

"We're not going after their houses." Harry said. "We're going to hit Gringotts."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "It's the most heavily protected building in the country."

"And us taking it down will be a pretty clear message." Harry said. "It will show them that they are just as vulnerable. Plus it will hit them where it hurts."

"You know that's insane, Harry."

"And therein lies the beauty." Harry said with a sly smile. "And it may just take out the whole power structure. Malfoy's world works on money, if that's disrupted, he's weak."

"But its Gringotts, what makes you think its even possible?"

"We found this document amongst the things of the original Order of the Phoenix detailing the security measures of Gringotts and most of them are Goblin based. With the Goblins gone, they'll be weakening, malfunctioning or plain gone. Even if we don't get all the way through, just the fact that we'd get in would spread panic."

Hermione looked unsure.

"He has to be stopped Hermione." Harry said. "He is setting himself up for absolute power, and its unacceptable."

"I know Harry, I just wished there was another way."

"I do too, but we've tried and he's only become more powerful. And sadly, we didn't help when we rescued him from Nott's. We actually removed the one block that seemed to stop him. If we had any idea what we were doing at the time..." Harry said. "I know this is hard for you, you care about him."

"He's the father of my child."

"You tried, Mione, but he is a tyrant and its not fair to ask us all to put up with it. Don't forget that he turned on you. It was inevitable that he would. He's a control freak and he would just have exerted more and more control over you as time went by. When it comes down to it, you would never be able to put up with that he's doing."

She knew in her gut that what Harry was saying was true, but it hurt because there was that period when things were good. Things were right for a little while. An illusion that just slipped through her fingers like sand. Why couldn't it just have frozen then? A nice bubble where the three of them were just happy. But now she had the brutal

disillusionment that was tearing her apart, and poor Cygnus was caught in the middle. She was grateful he wasn't old enough to understand.

Chapter 50

Chapter 50

Over the next week, more refugees turned up at Harry's. The Slytherins were attacking people's homes. The rooms of the house were starting to fill up and the whole house was feeling cramped.

Ron was angry and distant. He wasn't taking the loss of the Burrow well. Pansy was trying her best to cheer him up but he was adamant to be in a foul mood.

Hermione stayed in her room with Cygnus mostly. Sometimes she would go out to a muggle playground somewhere in London. Cygnus was still a little upset with all the commotion and change, but she did her best to entertain him.

To say this was fun was completely false, it was miserable. There was no certainty in the future, but they had no choice to keep going because the bridges back were all burnt. It reminded her of what Churchill said, 'If you find yourself in hell, keep going', or something to that effect. That embodied their situation at the moment.

The situation had devolved so quickly. It was practically all out war now. No declarations, public negotiations, it was just like someone had flipped a switch.

She saw Dean in one of the sitting rooms when she got back. It hadn't been long since she'd seen him last, it just felt like a lifetime.

"Are you staying here now?" Hermione asked.

"They burnt my house." Dean said. "There was nothing we could do."

"I'm sorry." Hermione said. She knew they didn't have much, only the property left by his family.

"He gave me an ultimatum." Dean said looking away. "Hand you over or lose the house."

Hermione was shocked, she had not expected to hear that Draco would threaten to get to her. Although she realised that Harry had.

"Not that we ever would." Dean said defiantly.

"Thank you." Hermione said. She didn't know what to say, what do you say to someone who sacrifices all they have for your safety? A friend. "We will get through this."

"I know." Dean said. "But if he threatened us, he is likely to do it to others."

Hermione recognised the underlying warning. There were probably people who would rather hand her over than lose their houses. She would have to watch her back.

She took her leave of Dean and went to her room. Cygnus was playing with Ginny, which was good because she needed some time to think. Something had to change, she knew that in her bones. She wasn't going to be hidden away, fought over like some object. Or even conceived off as being traded for favours. No, she was going to fight. No more hiding. She wasn't going to be anyone's solution, instead she was going to be a bigger pain in his arse than she already was.

She went downstairs in the evening when everyone was doing their planning session. Joined them in the kitchen. Some gave her curious looks, some were suspicious. She didn't care.

"So, the plans for Gringotts is coming together." Harry said. "We hit it in three days."

"I'm coming." Hermione said.

"Hermione, I think its best you stay out of sight." Harry said.

"No. I'm not hiding away, I'm coming." She said. "This is my fight as much as it is anyones, maybe more. I'm not going to cower away and I don't care what you think."

"Ok." Harry said. He didn't look convinced, but neither did he argue with her. No one else did either.

"We know who is guarding it and how many will be there. If we take our positions, we can defend it when reinforcements arrive." Harry said. "We expect it to be messy, and in some respects, its better that it is. The point of doing this is to send a message. A strong one. And its that nothing is solid. We can get in there and we can hold it."

"Yeah, but for how long?" Someone asked.

"It doesn't matter." Harry continued. "That fact that we get in will show them that they have nothing to depend upon. Stability and order is the only think Malfoy offers, and if he can't do that, then he has nothing."

The covered their positions in more detail including the timings and sequence. It was a fairly simple plan and they had the numbers to pull it off. The meeting concluded soon after.

"Hermione, can we talk for a minute." Harry said.

"You're not changing my mind." She said.

"Its just that things will get messy." Harry said. "It will likely be a full on fight. Hexes flying."

"I know, Harry." She said. "We've been in a few already remember."

"He will be gunning for you."

"He always does. No change there. Look, I can't sit here and let others do it. I am a part of this and I'm not going to be something in the background. If he wants to take me on, he's welcome to. I am not hiding from anything."

"You have a child that needs you."

"And that needs a future that is more than this. There is no going back, only forward and I am not going to sit passively by and let it just develop. It is my future too." She said. There was a part of her that also knew that Cygnus would be alright whatever happened. If things turned to complete shit and Draco ruled unbridled, then he would probably be better off with Draco and without her. Growing up on the run was not a good outcome. It made her worried for Harry and Ginny's baby if they failed. It just meant that they couldn't fail.

The day of the Gringott's heist came around all too quickly. They had started to call it a heist as a joke, but it just stuck. A bit of humour for a situation that was in no way funny. They had no misconceptions that they were going into a fight. People would get hurt. Although it felt like something that had been brewing since they all started at Hogwarts. The Battle of Gringotts, the long awaited showdown between the Slytherins and Gryffindors.

They were taking it at closing. And their plan, at its simplest, meant they were just walking through the doors. They were met by surprise and confusion for a bit. Some of the guard were stunned while others were held. There were only two customers in the store, who were quickly shoved out the door.

They knew warnings had already been sent, because they found Blaise with his head in the fire. A position which left him unable to draw his wand as quickly as Harry had.

"You're going to pay for this." Blaise said. "This has to be the stupidest thing you've ever conceived of."

"Maybe." Harry said taking Blaise's wand off him. "But it seemed like fun. Now move over there, if you please."

"Watch him." He said to Ron. "He probably has wands stashed everywhere."

Harry, Hermione and Dean went to work on the wards into the vaults.

"There's still that friggin Dragon down there." Dean said. "Its going to try to toast us."

"Maybe its time to set the poor creature free." Hermione said with a smile. It felt good to be completely defiant and subversive.

"As longs and I don't get my cheek fried for it."

Their guesses had been right, the wards were weak. The goblin wards had not been reinforced and didn't take a great deal of effort. Otherwise, it was the standard wards. It took a bit of time, but it wasn't really difficult.

The next difficulty was the dragon. It would be completely impossible to get by it. It knew they were coming and tried to turn them into wizard crisps pretty much the instant they showed themselves.

They fired hexes at its chains.

"Its amazing that no one actually thought of this, that you could just set the damned thing free, problem solved."

"I think they just thought no one would dare to approach it." Harry said. "I can't believe how hot that fire is."

"Probably not one of your greatest statements." Hermione said. "I think you should leave that one out of your memoirs."

They managed to free the dragon's chains and it took the creature a while to figure out that it wasn't tethered.

"They're not that smart, are they?" Dean said.

"Its just been here a really long time." Hermione said.

It was quiet now. The creature was obviously thinking. Another shot of fire sizzled past them.

"Its coming closer." Harry said.

"Crap, its going through the hall." Hermione said. "Its coming this way."

"It knows where the exit is, I guess."

"It will never fit through the doors."

Hermione managed a quick Patronus to warn the other that there was a dragon coming their way. Things turned messy for a while and columns were knocked over and the dragon scrambled its way through the walkway towards the main hall. It knocked over walls as they hid in one of the corners. They could hear the tearing sound as the dragon forced its too large body through the main security doors.

"It think it took the doors with it." Dean said.

"We don't need them now." Harry said. "Now we need to empty some vaults."

"Malfoy's?" Dean said.

"No leave his." Hermione said. "If we want to send a message, we need to hit the ones who are likely to make a fuss."

"Lets hit some of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. The ones who are currently depending on Malfoy's protection."

"I'd be more than happy to do Marietta Edgecombe." Hermione said.

"And Malcolm Preece, he's a complete wanker." Dean said.

They broke into two of the vaults with the key that one of the goblins had given to Dumbledore in a fit of rebelliousness against

Voldemort. It took some force, but they gave eventually. They cleared them out and stashed them in Luna's mother's family vault.

They were going to do more, but the fighting in the hall was obviously intensifying. They could hear the searing hexes as they got close. Hermione felt one just over her head, which gave her goosepimples all over. She couldn't quite believe they were in a full on fight again. The last one had been the werewolves at Hogwarts. Where Draco had come to her rescue, belatedly.

He wasn't coming to her rescue now. She could see him through the smoke and the flying debris. He was firing hexes with precision. He had obviously practiced for this kind of thing. Who knew that the Death Eaters actually had him doing. He never really revealed what he had to do for them.

The fighting continued. Blaise had managed to free himself and was fighting on the Slytherin side. The pace of the fighting was intense and the hall was a complete mess. Good. Later everyone could see how badly this place had been ripped apart. Hermione was taking cover behind an up-turned desk, shooting hexes every few seconds.

Someone not far away went down with a scorching hex, screaming in pain, while someone else was thrown against the wall. She got distracted and was hit in the arm, brutally flipping her through the air and onto the floor.

She instinctively knew who had hit her and it was confirmed as soon as she looked up. He was far away but he was staring straight at her. She threw a *reducto* hex at him, which he blocked all too expertly. He was about to hit her again when he was engaged by someone else closer to him. Hermione scurried behind a pillar.

The fighting intensified again and Hermione was ducking behind the pillar whenever something came her way. She managed to knock out Goyle.

But then a change happened, she wasn't sure how or what, but the air changed. She heard a killing curse and a scream. It was not something she had expected. It was wrong, everything felt wrong. The whole hall grew silence as the sound of a body hit the floor. Someone was dead.

This was not the way it was supposed to be. This was too serious. They were supposed to be fighting, not killing.

Hermione stepped out from behind the pillar to an eerie silence. Draco was standing across the hall with his wand down but gripped tightly in his pale hand. There was a collective shock at what had just happened. Hermione's eyes followed the direction of their stares to the body that was lying on the floor. A panic went through her that it was Harry, but it wasn't it was Pansy. Like she had known that Draco had hit her, she also knew that it was Draco that fired the killing curse at Pansy.

"You bastard!" Ron screamed and started firing hexes at Draco. Draco blocked them, but didn't retaliate. He didn't look smug or happy, and Hermione knew that he was aware of what he'd just done. He looked at her for a split second before he turned away.

Others started firing hexes, but the heat had gone. The Slytherins blocked as they retreated, but weren't retaliating much.

"She's fucking dead!" Ron screamed and ran towards her crumpled form. "She's dead."

He was crying now and she couldn't listen to it. She walked back towards the vaults and started clearing some out. Part of her wanted to be with Ron, but another part of her knew that he would lash out at her. Blame her. Maybe she was in some way responsible. It felt like she was.

They had paid a heavy price for this, so better make it a good message she thought to herself. There was nothing else she could do now.

Dean came and joined her as they worked for an hour to clear the contents of vaults, stuffing the contents into the vaults of deceased and forgotten families. They weren't there to steal, they were there to change things, to make sure this never happened again.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51

The mood was quiet and dark when Hermione got back to Harry's. Ron had taken off somewhere. Harry was worried that Ron would do something stupid, but he refused to be stopped.

Cygnus was asleep on her bed. He looked completely peaceful and oblivious. She wished she could be oblivious. Instead she had the knowledge that Draco was now beyond saving. She had tried so hard and it had gotten her nowhere.

She didn't feel angry, just this pervasive and consuming sadness. Sadness for Pansy and Ron, and for Cygnus. Sad for the love that was still there, but had no avenue.

She couldn't even imagine what was going through Draco's mind now. What place was he in where he could live with such an act? Or even feel it was justified. He was lost to her now.

She turned her attention back to her son. He was the only thing that mattered now. Protecting him was the only purpose.

Ron returned the next day, but he was completely shut down. He didn't want to deal with anyone and had no interest in hearing how sorry she was for what had happened. He shut himself in his room and didn't come out again.

It didn't take long for the war to start again. The Slytherins were chasing down Gryffindors anywhere they could think of. They were even starting to confront people they thought were sympathetic.

"We can't take any more people here." Harry said to her one afternoon.

"People are scared." Hermione said.

"They know we are here." Harry said. "Draco would know about this house, even if he doesn't know the location. If he is adamant on finding it, it might just be a matter of time."

"So we prepare for an attack."

"I think we need to move some people to Hogwarts." Harry said. "The wards there are strong. Lupin has been working on them. Hogwarts is better protected than here. Malfoy hasn't shown any interest in Hogwarts yet. But its one of the only places that he doesn't control."

"But you think its only a matter of time?"

"He wants complete control. He believes that it the end game. Which means he will inevitably go after Hogwarts, but I think he will try to attack us first. If we are gone, Hogwart's fall would be inevitable."

"So we don't let that happen." Hermione said with determination.

"I think you should go to Hogwarts." Harry said. "There are preparations to be made, and if he manages to take us by surprise, you won't be here."

"I am not running away, Harry."

"And you won't be." Harry said. "You'll come if there is a fight, but if we're taken by surprise, you're the last line of defence at Hogwarts. I don't think it will come to that, but we have to prepare for the eventuality. And I need someone a bit more politically savvy to deal with the Slytherin students at Hogwarts. There aren't many of them, but we need to establish who's side they are on."

"What about Ginny?"

"I want her there too."

"You are expecting an attack."

"Pretty soon." Harry said. "I think Malfoy wants to finish this as soon as possible. But then there is always the possibility of him wanting to get you more than anything. Either way, we have to stop him."

Hermione packed and left for Hogwarts the next day, along with Luna, Ginny and the Patel twins. It was strange being back in the familiar surroundings of Hogwarts. It felt like a lifetime ago since they'd been there. It had only been a year.

Lupin had managed to return the school to normalcy to some degree, but it still felt off like something was wrong. Obviously all the professors were gone, which left the enforced normalcy feeling a little creepy.

Neville was happy to see them, he actually looked like a professor. He seemed to have just grown into the role. He showed them to their rooms.

"It's not much." He said. "But there's a fireplace if you need warmth. They are disconnected from the floo network, as are most except for the one in Professor Lupin's office. It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you too, Neville." Hermione said trying to keep Cygnus from squiggling out of her arms. He was not going to be happy about another change in environment.

"Now I have to go to class." Neville said. "Third years. Who knew how annoying they could be. I hope we weren't this annoying."

"We were probably more so." Ginny said.

They didn't have long to settle in. Four days before Draco found Grimmauld Place. The wards held him back. They were Dumbledore's and Snape's wards, and they were still relatively strong. The Slytherins were pounding through them.

Hermione armed herself and left Cygnus with Ginny, who was now too pregnant to be able to move at any speed.

"It's only going to be a matter of time." Harry said when Hermione apparated in.

"We have to retreat." Hermione said. "We go back to Hogwarts."

"That will only draw the fight there." Harry said. "No, we have to stand here."

"Eventually they will come in, Harry." Hermione said.

"I know."

"He's killing."

"Then we will have to make sure he doesn't get a chance." Harry said. "I don't think the other are, so we need to take him out first." He said and watched her for her reaction. A reaction she didn't know what it consisted of. But rationally she knew it would come down to this. "You have to go back to Hogwarts, Hermione. I need you to protect Ginny. Please Hermione. If nothing else, Ginny has to live."

"No, it can't come to this." She cried. "Maybe if I give myself up, maybe he will back off."

"He will kill you, Hermione and take Cygnus, and for what? A day. He will only be back here tomorrow." Harry said. "We have to stop him, and it's going to be tonight. I know you still care for him, so don't watch this."

Hermione wanted to argue, but she knew that Harry was right. And she needed to protect Cygnus and Ginny. If Harry died tonight, she would do that for him. Finally she nodded.

"Go now." Harry said. She gave Harry a hug and walked out to the apparating point they had managed to work through the wards.

She hated leaving, but she knew she had to. If this went bad, she needed to take care of things. She went to the library and sat down to do some contingency planning. If he came for Hogwarts, she

would need to run. She would take Ginny and Cygnus and hide somewhere. She just didn't know where to go. The Burrow had always been the place to go when things got dicey, but it wasn't there anymore.

They would have to go into the muggle world, or whatever was left of it. Maybe find a way over to the Continent. Maybe the chunnel was still dry and they could walk through. She doubted the Slytherins knew about it, but Merlin knows what the muggles had done to it. She could only hope it was still viable.

Her thinking was interrupted by the sound of hexes flying. She heard a scream and jumped out of the chair. She had to get to Ginny and Cygnus. She didn't want to know what this meant with regards to Grimmauld Place. Surely it couldn't have fallen in a half hour. It didn't matter, she had a job to do.

There was panic outside the library. Hermione could see a werewolf chasing a student. She shot a hex at it, knocking out a window. It would fall quite far, but she didn't care. Served it right.

She ran towards where Ginny was, hoping she hadn't moved. They hadn't had time to plan what to do if this happened.

A hex knocked her off her feet. She knew who had thrown it. How was he here? How had he gotten in without even a fight? But he was here and he had werewolves with him. She could see Lupin and some student's fighting down in the courtyard. She got up and ran. Draco was behind her, and he was coming fast.

She realised she was leading him right to Cygnus, which was not a good thing. She needed to lead him away. She shot a hex over her shoulder, which obviously missed.

Somehow she ended up on the stairs to the Astronomy tower. She was stuck. There was no way out, and no way back. This is where she would have to face him.

She stood in the shadows as she listened to him slowly walk up the stairs. He knew he had her, so he wasn't in a hurry.

"Nowhere left to go." He said. She was pretty sure he didn't know exactly where she was. He was unmistakeable in the dark, his hair shone. "Bet you didn't expect to see me.

"How did you get in?"

"Funny thing." He said. "Voldemort had me working on these vanishing cabinets before they all disappeared. He needed a way into Hogwarts and I was just about finished when he was no longer a problem in my backside. Who would have thought that the work he had me doing would end up serving me so well. See I knew you would come here as soon as I house the Black house."

He had reached the top of the steps.

"You planned all this."

"You took my son, you bitch. I will be requiring him back now."

She didn't answer, wondering if there was some way to get past him, but he would see her. He had his wand gripped firmly in his hand.

"I told you to never give me reason to not trust you, and you betrayed me in the most fundamental way. You took my child. How exactly did you expect that I would react?"

"Oh, I don't know." She said seething with anger. "Maybe go and murder Pansy."

"She betrayed me." He said darkly after a while.

"You're completely mental."

"No, but I expect people who ask me to trust them to stick to what they say." He shouted. "But you didn't, you stabbed me in the back

the first chance you got." He said emphasising by pointing his wand towards her.

"I have to protect my son."

"My son too, don't forget."

Obviously he knew where she was now.

"A Malfoy." He continued. "Who belongs with me, in the Malfoy ancestral home. So now I am taking him back where he belongs. Obviously, a battleground is not an appropriate place for a child. So I need to get him to safety before I sort this whole stupid mess."

"Over my dead body."

"Well, I kind of expected you to say that." He said. "You Gryffindors are so willing to die, aren't you? That's the problem with you, you never know when to give up. I am sorry to do this, believe me, but you gave me no choice. If you had just done what you were supposed to, had just trusted me to take care of you, this wouldn't have to happen."

He was standing very close to her. She knew she would only have one chance at defending herself. He had pretty much told her he intended on killing her. She had her wand in her hand. She didn't know if she was fast enough and strong enough to deflect a killing curse.

She'd been watching his wand since the minute he got there, but she finally looked him in the eyes. He wasn't gloating or teasing. There was no doubt that he was going to kill her. He wasn't happy about it, but he would do it.

She could see him tensing his hand to start the curse. He was bringing it up to give it the necessary flick. She dropped her wand and went for the knife she had at her back. She felt the steel was more reliable in this moment than the wand and its magic.

Luckily, it didn't catch in her waistband, it just slipped out into her hand and she brought it up and forced it into his body.

The force took him by surprise, stopping him in his tracks.

"You stabbed me." He said with surprise.

"You were about to kill me."

He looked down at the embedded knife and then back at her with confusion in his eyes.

"You got me in the liver. With a muggle weapon too." He said with a tight laugh. "That is just about the perfect shot. Well done."

She looked down at the wound. The blood was streaming out of it. The sight of it was making her sick, as was the thought of what she'd just done.

"I had to." She said. She hadn't consciously intended to stab him, it had just been an instinctual reaction. "You were going to hurt me." She heard herself justify.

He grabbed the knife and pulled it out of his body. It clunked to the ground.

"I'm sorry." She said automatically.

"I can't believe you stabbed me."

The blood was flowing stronger now. It was really flowing.

"I'll get help." She said. "We have to put pressure on it, and I'll get help."

"Don't bother." He said. "I'll be dead before you get back. It really is the perfect shot. There is nothing I can do to stop it. Or anyone else. I will be dead in a minute."

He still had his wand in his hand, but he seemed to be unaware of it. She didn't know if he would retaliate, but he hadn't yet.

"I need to sit down." He said and started to lower down to his knees.

"I'm sorry." She said again. He was going to die. It was becoming more real now that he couldn't stand any more. But he couldn't sit either, he was lying down. She didn't know what to do, so she just kneeled beside him.

"I knew you would be the death of me." He said with a smile. "I knew you were trouble. I should have kept you as far away from me as possible, I just couldn't help myself." He said and touched one of the locks on her hair.

"Draco." She said, she couldn't stop the tears from flowing. "I didn't want this."

He nodded, but he was growing less coherent in his movements. He was dying and it was horrible to watch. She wanted to do something to stop this, but she couldn't. If she had the means to stop it, she would. She knew intellectually that she shouldn't, but the part of her that loved him was overruling such thoughts.

"Don't go." She said. He smiled, but he couldn't keep his eyes open. "I love you."

"I love you too." He said barely audible.

She felt a sense of panic, but couldn't do anything, so she lay down beside him and snuggled in. The blood was still flowing out of the wound she had caused. He jerked up and tried to sit up, but he couldn't. He was growling as he tried to fight unconsciousness, but he was losing the battle.

He slipped away. The wound stopped bleeding and he was just still. Hermione stayed lying by him with her head on his shoulder and her

arm wrapped around him. It was too much to think about, so she ignored what had just happened and all its implications.

For now, for a little while, she would pretend they were back when they were happy. In bed, sleeping in the morning, waiting for Cygnus to come padding in when he woke. They had it so good for a while, but in was never meant to last. Why couldn't it have just lasted? They had it perfect for a little while.

Lying there next to him, this was the last time she would remember what perfect felt like. The rest of the world didn't have to exist for a little while. She wasn't sure how long she lay there for, but as soon as she got up, there would be no going back. He would be gone forever.

The sky was starting to get lighter. It made her think of Shakespeare then the lovers were arguing over whether it was the Lark or Nightingale they heard, which indicated whether it was time to go or if they could stay a bit longer.

The brutal dawn would be here soon. She didn't know what it meant for the future and less what it meant for her emotionally. Nothing good.

She heard foot steps.

"Time to go, Mione." She heard Harry's calm voice. It broke the spell and made her want to cry. She got up, she had to. There was no point holding on, it was over. A new day.

"I had to."

"I know." Harry said. "You should go now. Cygnus will be waking soon. He needs you."

"But I need to..." She said turning back to Draco's still form on the floor. A large pool of blood around him.

"I'll take care of it." Harry said. "Go now."

She turned away and walked down the stairs. Cygnus needed her. She would try her best to raise him as a Malfoy, it was his inheritance, but maybe with some slight modifications. She had to let go of the past, she knew, she had to be strong for Cygnus. The tears would flow for a little while, then she would stop.

The End

A/N Thanks everyone for reading and reviewing. I know this is messier ending than a happy ending, but its where the story took me.